

# **LOGICAL CRITICISM OF BUDDHIST DOCTRINES**

*A Thematic Compilation*

**Avi Sion, Ph.D.**

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## **Abstract.**

*Logical Criticism of Buddhist Doctrines* is a ‘thematic compilation’ by Avi Sion. It collects in one volume the essays that he has written on this subject over a period of some 15 years after the publication of his first book on Buddhism, *Buddhist Illogic*. It comprises expositions and empirical and logical critiques of many (though not all) Buddhist doctrines, such as impermanence, interdependence, emptiness, the denial of self or soul. It includes his most recent essay, regarding the five skandhas doctrine.

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## Foreword

This volume constitutes a critical review, mainly on logical grounds, of some of the main Buddhist doctrines, including impermanence, interdependence, emptiness, the denial of self, and the ‘five skandhas’ claim.

The essays here collected were written by Avi Sion, sporadically over a period of some fifteen years, following the publication in 2002 of his initial book on this subject, *Buddhist Illogic*. These essays were scattered in several of his books, namely: *Phenomenology*, *The Logic of Causation*, *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts*, *Ruminations*, *Meditations*, and *Logical and Spiritual Reflections*; the last essay, concerning the five skandhas doctrine, has (at this time) not yet been formally published (except online).

The present essays deal with essentially the same topics, but with increasing breadth and depth. The themes are recurrent, but the issues are progressively clarified and further addressed. The author’s thoughts on the subject have evolved, but his overall conclusions have remained much the same: many of Buddhism’s traditional doctrines are open to sustained criticism from an objective, logical (both inductive and deductive) point of view.

The essays are ordered more or less chronologically, although some later essays are placed before earlier ones for literary reasons. Essays on related topics, written in the same period, are grouped in common chapters; but chapters on similar subjects, written in different periods, might be placed far apart. The goal, in such cases, is to avoid monotony and to make the material readable. Normally, when a topic is treated again, arguments are

not needlessly repeated, but new arguments are brought to bear.

The author's motive in writing these critical essays has never been antagonistic. He has no axe to grind against Buddhism, far from it. He respects many aspects of Buddhism, and admits having been personally and philosophically inspired and helped by it. However, albeit such influence, he would not label himself 'a Buddhist'. Also, to be clear, although he has for many years regularly practiced meditation, and benefitted much from it, he makes no claim to being 'enlightened'.

It should also be said that this author's writings on Buddhism are not intended as scholarly studies of Buddhist literature or history. Many such studies exist, and he has of course read some of them. He is not interested in making a show of erudition, but in studying thoughts. His writings focus on examining concepts, theories and methods found in many Buddhist source-texts and modern books about Buddhism. It does not matter to him who said what, when; what matters to him is whether what was said is credible, or at least conceivable.

The author does not subscribe to a purely faith-based approach to the doctrines examined; his prime loyalty is to reason. He is not credulously passing on Buddhist claims or dogma, or engaged in apologetics. He is a sincere searcher, looking for objective truth rather than for emotional comfort. He is not interested in pleasant illusions, but intent on knowing the facts, or at least knowing how logically defensible any given thesis is. His work is addressed to like-minded individuals.

All this is said because of the negative reactions that the author's past book, *Buddhist Illogic*, has triggered in some readers. That book has been one of his most read publications; but, while many readers have expressed pleasure and gratitude for it, some have on the contrary

very aggressively reviled the author for it. The author, to repeat, has no antipathy to Buddhism, no polemical intent in writing some critical things about it. His approach is clinical, unprejudiced.

The author treats Judaic doctrines, which he also has interest in, in an equally dispassionate and demanding manner. His Buddhist and Judaic interests are not greatly at odds in his mind; rather, they complement each other, enrich each other. Moreover, while they have both brought much to the author intellectually and spiritually, he has always (though especially since the writing of *Future Logic* in his early forties), looked upon them both with a healthy dose of caution and questioning.

Logic and philosophy, in the most rational sense of these terms, must always be referred to for judgment of doctrines with spiritual intent. The factual, theoretical and methodological claims of such doctrines must be subjected to serious scrutiny. When one is a novice, and still absorbing and understanding spiritual ideas and guidelines, one may (and indeed must) enthusiastically receive them. But when one matures, and these ideas and guidelines are fully assimilated, one should certainly question them, carefully analyze them, and determine (to the best of one's ability) their precise intellectual standing.

There is no honor in naivety, or in blind loyalty to any dogma pro or con. An independent thinker does not play favorites, but tries to be scrupulously honest and fair. This is just respect for reality, the refusal to be fooled or to fool. The present volume is, it is hoped, an illustration of this worthy attitude.

(Written in the third person by the author, 2017.)

## 1. Nagarjuna's fake logic

*Drawn from Buddhist Illogic (2002), chapters 1-3 and appendix 1.*

The Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 113-213 CE), who founded the Madhyamika (Middle Way) school, one of the Mahayana streams, which strongly influenced Chinese (Ch'an), Korean (Sôん) and Japanese (Zen) Buddhism, as well as Tibetan Buddhism, is often touted by Buddhists as one of the greatest philosophers of Buddhism. It is claimed that he was a master logician, who managed to show the illogic of logic. But in truth, his discourse is merely a malicious parody of logic; it is shameless sophistry. The present chapter contains a few extracts from *Buddhist Illogic*, the book in which I analyze Nagarjuna's main arguments<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. Fallacies in Nagarjuna's work

The following are the main fallacies that I have found Nagarjuna committing in his philosophical treatment of "emptiness".

*Fallacy of the Tetralemma.*

This consists in treating the combinations "both A and non-A" (contradiction) and "neither A nor non-A" (inclusion of the middle) as formal possibilities. But these are in all cases (i.e.

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<sup>1</sup> As they are presented in Hsueh-li Cheng's *Empty Logic*.

whatever “A” stands for) logically forbidden at the outset.

*Fallacy of the Inconclusive Dilemma.*

This consists in making a dilemma appear conclusive, when in fact one (or all) of its horns (major premises) is (or are) problematic rather than assertoric. Dilemmatic argument can be validated only when its major premises are all proper if-then statements, not when any of them is an “if – maybe-then” statement.

*Fallacy of the Denial of One and All.*

This consists in denying one theory about some issue, and making it seem as if one has thus denied all possible theories about it. The denial, to be thorough, must indeed consider all alternative theories before drawing such negative conclusion about the issue.

*Fallacy of the Ungranted Premise.*

This consists in taking for granted a premise which is not generally accepted and which has not been adequately supported, or indeed which is generally unaccepted or which has been convincingly refuted.

*Fallacy of the Unclear Theory or Term.*

This consists in glossing over relevant details or nuances, which make all the difference in the understanding of the term or theory concerned. A term or theory should be defined and made precise so far as possible in the context of knowledge concerned, so that relative propositions can be properly tested.

*Fallacy of Equivocation.*

This consists in using a single term in two (or more) different senses within one’s thesis, so as

to make it seem that what has been established in relation to one of the senses has been established in relation to the other(s). This is made possible by fuzziness in definition of terms.

*Fallacy of the Concept Doubting Percept.*

This consists in using a concept to put in doubt the very percept(s) which has (or have) given rise to it in the first place. The order of things, i.e. the genesis of the concept in knowledge, how it arises in relation to certain percepts, must always be acknowledged and respected.

*Fallacy of the Inappropriate Fixation.*

This consists in pretending that a term that has intrinsically variable meaning has fixed meaning. Notably, terms like “this”, “here” or “now” are intrinsically variable, in that the same word is always used, even as the actual object, time or place referred to differs; such terms do not remain stuck to their referents once and for all.

*Fallacy of the Double Standard.*

This consists in being severe towards one’s opponent’s argument while being lenient with regard to one’s own argument, although the two arguments are formally similar or have similar strengths and/or weaknesses.

## 2. The Tetralemma

Western philosophical and scientific thought is based on Aristotelian logic, whose founding principles are the three “Laws of Thought”. These can be briefly stated as “A is A” (Identity), “Nothing is both A and non-A” (Non-contradiction) and “Nothing is neither A nor non-

A” (Exclusion of the Middle). These are not claimed as mere hypotheses, note well, but as incontrovertible premises of all rational human thought<sup>2</sup>.

The *tetralemma*<sup>3</sup> is a derivative of the laws of thought, with reference to any two terms or propositions, labeled A and B, and their opposites non-A and non-B. Four combinations of these four terms are conceivable, namely “A and B” (both), “non-A and non-B” (neither), “A and non-B” and “non-A and B” (one or the other only). According to Aristotelian logic, these four statements are incompatible with each other (*only one of them can be true*, because if two or more were affirmed then “A and non-A” or “B and non-B” or both would be true, and the latter implications are self-contradictory) and exhaustive (*at least one of them must be true*, since if they were all denied then “not A and not non-A” or “not B and not non-B” or both would be true, and the latter implications go against the excluded middle).

Now, what Nagarjuna does is insert the term A in place of B (i.e. he takes the case of B = A), and effectively claim that the above four logical possibilities of combination apply in that special case – so that “A and A (=B)”, “non-A and non-A (=non-B)”, “A and non-A (=non-B)”, “non-A and A (=B)” seem logically acceptable. He then goes on to argue that there are **four existential possibilities: affirmation of A (A + A = A), denial of A (non-A + non-A = non-A), both**

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<sup>2</sup> See my *Future Logic* (Geneva: Author, 1996. Rev. ed.), ch. 2 and 20, and later essays on the subject (published on my website [www.thelogician.net](http://www.thelogician.net)).

<sup>3</sup> See Cheng, pp. 36-38, on this topic. He there refers to MT opening statement, as well as XVII:12a and XXIII:1a. Etym. Gk. *tetra* = four, *lemma* = alternatives. Term coined in contrast to the dilemma “A or non-A”.

**affirmation and denial of A (A and non-A) and neither affirmation nor denial of A (not A and not non-A).** He is thus apparently using the principles and terminology of common logic to arrive at a very opposite result. This gives him and readers the impression that it is quite reasonable to both affirm and deny or to neither affirm nor deny.

But in Aristotelian logic, the latter two alternatives are at the outset excluded – “both A and non-A” by the Law of Non-contradiction and “neither A nor non-A” by the Law of the Excluded-Middle – and the only logical possibilities left are “A” or “non-A”. The anti-Aristotelian position may be viewed, in a positive light, as an anti-Nominalist position, reminding us that things are never quite what they seem or that things cannot be precisely classified or labeled. But ultimately, they intend the death of Logic; for without the laws of thought, how are we to distinguish between true and false judgments?

The law of identity “A is A” is a conviction that things have some identity (whatever it specifically be) rather than another, or than no identity at all. It is an affirmation that knowledge is ultimately possible, and a rejection of sheer relativism or obscurantism. Nagarjuna’s goal is to deny identity.

It should be noted here that Aristotle is very precise in his formulation of the law of contradiction, stating in his *Metaphysics* “The same attribute cannot *at the same time* belong and not belong *to the same subject in the same respect*” (italics mine). Thus, an alternative statement of the laws of thought would be the ‘trilemma’ (let us so call it) “either wholly A, or wholly non-A, or both partly A and partly non-A”, which excludes the fourth alternative “both wholly A and wholly non-A”. The Buddhist attack on the laws of thought draws some of its credibility from the fact that people

subconsciously refer to this ‘trilemma’, thinking superficially that indeed opposite things may occur in the same place at different times or at the same time in different places or in various respects, without thereby giving rise to logical difficulty incapable of resolution. But it should be clear that the Buddhist position is much more radical than that, accepting thoroughgoing antinomy.

Similarly with regard to the law of the excluded middle, which affirms the situation “neither A nor non-A” to be impossible *in fact*. People are misled by the possibility of uncertainty *in knowledge*, as to whether A or non-A is the case in fact, into believing that this law of thought is open to debate. But it must be understood that the thrust of this logical rule is inductive, rather than deductive; i.e. it is a statement that *at the end* of the knowledge acquisition process, either “A” or “non-A” will result, and no third alternative can be expected. It does not exclude that *in the interim*, a situation of uncertainty may occur. Nagarjuna’s position exploits this confusion in people’s minds.

Nagarjuna interprets the limitation implied by the dilemma “A or non-A” as an arbitrary ‘dualism’ on the part of ordinary thinkers<sup>4</sup>. It only goes to show that he

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<sup>4</sup> It is misleading to call this a ‘duality’ or ‘dichotomy’, as Buddhists are wont to do, because it suggests that a unitary thing was arbitrarily cut into two – and incidentally, that it might just as well have been cut into four. But, on a perceptual level, there is no choice involved, and no ‘cutting-up’ of anything. A phenomenon appearing is *one single* thing, call it ‘a’ (a proper name, or an indicative ‘this’), and not a disjunction. The issue of ‘dichotomy’ arises only on a conceptual level. *Negation* is a rational act, i.e. we can only speak of ‘non-a’, of what does not appear, by first bringing to mind something ‘a’, which previously appeared (in sensation

misunderstands formalization (or he pretends to, in an attempt to confuse gullible readers). When logicians use a variable like “B” and allow that “non-A and B” and “A and non-B” are both in principle possible, they do not intend that as a generality applicable to *all* values of B (such as “A”), but only as a generic statement applicable to *any consistent* values of B. In the specific case where B = A, the said two combinations have to be eliminated because they are illegal (i.e. breach two of the laws of thought).

The above-stated property of symbols, i.e. their applicability only conditionally within the constraints of consistency, is evident throughout the science of formal logic, and it is here totally ignored by Nagarjuna. His motive of course was to verbalize and rationalize the Buddha’s doctrine that the ultimate truth is beyond *nama* and *rupa*, name and form (i.e. discrimination and discourse), knowable only by a transcendental consciousness (the Twofold Truth doctrine). More precisely, as Cheng emphasizes, Nagarjuna’s intent was to show that logic is inherently inconsistent and thus that reason is confused madness to be rejected. That is, he was (here and throughout) not ultimately trying to

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or imagination). In *initial conceptualization*, two phenomena are compared and contrasted, to each other and to other things, in some respect(s); the issue is then, are they similar enough to each other and different enough from other things to be judged ‘same’ and labeled by a general term (say ‘A’), or should they be judged ‘different’ or is there an uncertainty. At the *later stage of recognition*, we have to decide whether a third phenomenon fits in the class formed for the previous two (i.e. falls under ‘A’) or does not fit in (i.e. falls under ‘non-A’) or remains in doubt. In the latter case, we wonder whether it is ‘A’ or ‘non-A’, and forewarn that it cannot be both or neither.

defend a tetralemma with B equal to A – or even to affirm that things are both A and non-A, or neither A nor non-A – but wished to get us to look altogether beyond the distinctions of conceptualization and the judgments of logic.

But as above shown he does not succeed in this quest. For his critique depends on a misrepresentation of logical science. He claims to show that logic is confused and self-contradictory, but in truth what he presents as the thesis of logical science is not what it claims for itself but precisely what it explicitly forbids. Furthermore, suppose logical theory did lead to contradictions as he claims, this fact would not lead us to its rejection were there not also a tacit appeal to our preference for the logical in practice. If logic were false, contradictions would be acceptable. Thus, funnily enough, Nagarjuna appeals to our logical habit in his very recommendation to us to ignore logic. In sum, though he gives the illusion that it is reasonable to abandon reason, it is easy to see that his conclusion is foregone and his means are faulty.

### 3. Neither real nor unreal

But Nagarjuna also conceives ultimate reality (“emptiness”<sup>5</sup>) as a “middle way”<sup>6</sup> – so that the world of experience is neither to be regarded as real, nor to be regarded as unreal (“there is nothing, neither mental nor non-mental, which is real” and it “cannot be conceived

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<sup>5</sup> Beyond consciousness of “Shunyata” is a more vivid awareness called “Mahamudra”, according to Trungpa. But such refinements need not concern us here.

<sup>6</sup> See Cheng, pp. 38-39, on this topic. He there refers to MT XIII:9a and XVIII:7.

as unreal,” reports Cheng). In this context, Nagarjuna is clearly relying on one of the above-mentioned logically impossible disjuncts, namely “neither A nor non-A” (be it said in passing). I want to now show why Nagarjuna’s statement seems superficially reasonable and true.

As I have often clarified and explained<sup>7</sup>, knowledge has to be regarded or approached phenomenologically (that is the only consistent epistemological thesis). We have to start by acknowledging and observing *appearances*, as such, without initial judgment as to their reality or illusion. At first sight all appearances seem *real* enough. But after a while, we have to recognize that some appearances conflict with other appearances, and judge such appearances (i.e. one or more of those in conflict) as *illusory*. Since there is nothing in our ‘world’ but appearances, all remaining appearances not judged as illusions (i.e. so long as they are not logically invalidated by conflicts with other appearances) maintain their initial status as realities.

That is, the distinction between appearances as realities or illusions emerges within the world of appearances itself, merely classifying some this way and the rest that way. We have no concept of reality or illusion other than with reference to appearance. To use the category of reality with reference to something *beyond* appearance is concept stealing, a misuse of the concept, an extrapolation which ignores the concept’s actual genesis in the context of appearance. To apply the concept of illusion to *all* appearances, on the basis that some appearances are illusions, is an unjustified generalization ignoring how this concept arises with reference to a specific event (namely, inconsistency

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<sup>7</sup> See my *Future Logic*, ch. 60-62, and later essays on the subject.

between certain appearances and resulting diminishment of their innate credibilities). Moreover, to claim that no appearances are real or that all are illusions is self-defeating, since such claim itself logically falls under the category of appearance.

The illusory exists even though it is not reality – it exists as appearance. The real is also apparent – some of it, at least. Therefore, appearance *per se* is neither to be understood as reality (since some appearances are illusory), nor can it be equated to illusion (since not all appearances have been or can be found illusory). Appearance is thus the *common ground* of realities and illusions, their common characteristic, the dialectical synthesis of those theses and antitheses. It is a genus, they are mutually exclusive species of it. (The difference between appearance and existence is another issue, I have dealt with elsewhere – briefly put, existence is a genus of appearance and non-appearance, the latter concepts being relative to that of consciousness whereas the former is assumed independent.)

None of these insights allows the conclusion that appearances are “neither real nor unreal” (granting that ‘unreal’ is understood to mean ‘non-real’). All we can say is that some appearances are real and some unreal. Formally, the correct logical relation between the three concepts is as follows. *Deductively*, appearance is implied by reality and illusion, but does not imply them; for reality and illusion are contradictory, so that they cannot both be true and they cannot both be false. Moreover, *inductively*, appearance implies reality, until and unless it is judged to be illusion (by virtue of some inconsistency being discovered).

More precisely, all appearances are initially classed as real. Any appearance found self-contradictory is (deductively) illusory, and its contradictory is consequently self-evident and (deductively) real. All

remaining appearances remain classed as real, so long as uncontested. Those that are contested have to be evaluated dynamically. When one appearance is belied by another, they are both put in doubt by the conflict between them, and so both become initially *problematic*. Thereafter, their relative credibilities have to be tentatively weighed in the overall context of available empirical and rational knowledge – and repeatedly reassessed thereafter, as that context develops and evolves. On this basis, one of these appearances may be judged more credible than the other, so that the former is labeled *probable* (close to real) and the latter relatively *improbable* (close to illusory). In the limit, they may be characterized as respectively effectively (inductively) real or illusory. Thus, reality and illusion are the extremes (respectively, 100% and 0%) in a broad range of probabilities with many intermediate degrees (including problemacy at the mid-point).

To be still more precise, *pure percepts* (i.e. concrete appearances, phenomena) are never illusory. The value-judgment of ‘illusory’ properly concerns concepts (i.e. abstract appearances, ‘universals’) only. When we say of a percept that it was illusory, we just mean that we misinterpreted it. That is, what we initially considered as a pure percept, had in fact *an admixture of concept*, which as it turned out was erroneous. For example, I see certain shapes and colors in the distance and think ‘here comes a girl on a bike’, but as I get closer I realize that all I saw was a pile of rubbish by the roadside. The pure percept is the shapes and colors I see; the false interpretation is ‘girl on bike’, the truer interpretation is ‘pile of rubbish’. The initial percept has not changed, but my

greater proximity has added perceptual details to it. My first impression was correct, only my initial judgment was wrong. I revise the latter concept, not through some superior means to knowledge, but simply by means of *further perception and conception*.

Strictly speaking, then, perception is never at issue; it is our conceptions that we evaluate. It is in practice, admittedly, often very difficult to isolate a percept from its interpretation, i.e. from conceptual appendages to it. Our perception of things is, indeed, to a great extent ‘eidetic’. This fact need not, however, cause us to reject any perception (as many Western philosophers, as well as Buddhists, quickly do), or even all conception. The conceptual ‘impurities’ in percepts are not necessarily wrong. We know them to have been wrong, when we discover a specific cause for complaint – namely, a logical or experiential contradiction. So long as we find no such specific fault with them, they may be considered right. This just means that we have to apply the rules of adduction<sup>8</sup> to our immediate interpretations of individual percepts, just as we do to complex theories relative to masses of percepts. These rules are universal: no judgment is exempt from the requirement of careful scrutiny and reevaluation.

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<sup>8</sup> Adduction treats all conceptual knowledge as hypothetical, to be tested repeatedly – in competition with all conceivable alternative hypotheses – with reference to all available logic and experience.

Now, judging by Cheng's account and certain quotations of Nagarjuna therein, we could interpret the latter as having been trying to say just what I have said. For instance, Cheng writes<sup>9</sup>: "What Nagarjuna wanted to deny is that empirical phenomena... are absolutely real.... However, [this] does not mean that nothing exists. *It does not nullify anything in the world*" (my italics). I interpret this non-nullification as an acknowledgment of appearance as the minimum basis of knowledge. Nagarjuna may have had difficulties developing an appropriate terminology (distinguishing existence, appearance and reality, as I do above), influenced no doubt by his penchant for paradoxical statements seeming to express and confirm Buddhist mystical doctrine.

But if that is what he meant, then he has not succeeded to arrive at a "middle way" (a denial of the Law of the Excluded Middle), but only at a "common way" (a granted common ground). As far as I am concerned, that is not a meager achievement – the philosophical discovery of phenomenology! But for him that would be trivial, if not counterproductive – for what he seeks is to deny ordinary consciousness and its inhibiting rationales, and to thereby leap into a different, higher consciousness capable of reaching transcendental truth or ultimate reality.

It is interesting to note that the Madhyamika school's effective denial of reality to all appearance was not accepted by a later school of Mahayana philosophy, the Yogachara (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> cent. CE). Cheng describes the latter's position as follows<sup>10</sup>: "Every object, both mental and non-mental, may be logically or dialectically proven

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<sup>9</sup> P. 42.

<sup>10</sup> P. 25.

illusory. But in order to be illusory, there must be a certain thought that suffers from illusion. *The very fact of illusion itself proves the existence and reality of a certain consciousness or mind.* To say that everything mental and non-mental is unreal is intellectually suicidal. The reality of something should at least be admitted in order to make sense of talking about illusion” (italics mine). That is the tenor of the phenomenological argument I present above, although my final conclusion is clearly not like Yogachara’s, that everything is consciousness or mind (a type of Idealism), but leaves open the possibility of judging and classifying appearances as matter or mind with reference to various considerations.

The Madhyamika rejection of ‘dualism’ goes so far as to imply that “emptiness” is not to be found in nirvana, the antithesis of samsara (according to the earlier Buddhist viewpoint), but in ‘neither samsara nor nirvana’. In truth, similar statements may be found in the Pali Canon, i.e. in the much earlier Theravada schools, so that it is not a distinctly Mahayana construct. The difference is one of emphasis, such statements, relatively rare in the earlier period, are the norm and frequently repeated in the later period. An example may be found in the *Dhammapada*, a sutra dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE<sup>11</sup>, i.e. four or five hundred years before

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<sup>11</sup> This is supposedly the date of composition, though the translator, Juan Mascaró, in his Introduction, states “compiled” at that time, thus seeming to imply an earlier composition. It is not clear in that commentary when the sutra is estimated to have been first written down. And if it was much later, say in the period of crystallization of Mahayana thought, say in 100 BCE to 100 CE, the latter may have influenced the monks who did the writing down. See ch. 26 (383-5) for the quotation.

Nagarjuna. Here, samsara is likened to a stream or this shore of it, and nirvana to the further shore; and we are told to get beyond the two.

“When you have crossed the stream of Samsara, you will reach Nirvana... He has reached the other shore, then he attains the supreme vision and all his fetters are broken. He for whom there is neither this nor the further shore, nor both....”

Such a formula is legitimate if taken as a warning that *pursuing* nirvana (enlightenment and liberation) is an obstacle to achieving it, just a subtle form of samsara (ignorance and attachment); there is no contradiction in saying that *the thought of* nirvana as a goal of action keeps us in samsara – this is an ordinary causal statement. The formula is also logically acceptable if taken as a reminder that no word or concept – not even ‘samsara’ or ‘nirvana’ – can capture or transmit the full meanings intended (i.e. ‘not’ here should more precisely be stated as ‘not quite’). There is also no contradiction in saying that one who has attained nirvana does not need to leave the world of those locked in samsara, but can continue to exist and act in it though distinctively in a way free of attachment.

But it would be a contradiction in terms to speak of ‘emptiness’ as ‘neither samsara nor nirvana’, given that nirvana as a concept is originally defined as non-samsara; the truth cannot be a third alternative. At best, one could say that emptiness is a higher level of nirvana (in an enlarged sense), which is not to be confused with the lower level intended by the original term nirvana, nor of course with samsara. In that case, nirvana (in a generic sense of the term, meaning literally non-samsara) includes both a higher species and a lower one;

and the statement ‘neither samsara nor lower-nirvana’ is then compatible with the statement ‘higher nirvana’. There is a big difference between rough, poetic, dramatic language, and literal interpretation thereof.

#### 4. Misuse of dilemma

As we shall presently see, Nagarjuna often frames his arguments in dilemmatic form. So, let me here give you a primer on the formal logic of dilemma. The form he tends to use is what logicians call ‘simple constructive dilemma’, which looks like this:

If X, then Y – and if not X, then Y  
(the major premises, or ‘horns’ of the  
dilemma)  
but either X or not X  
(the minor premise, left un stated if  
obvious)  
therefore, Y  
(the conclusion)

where “X” and “not X” refers to some propositions under consideration and “Y” the (explicit or implicit) intermediate and final conclusion. In Nagarjuna, “Y” usually has the negative content “Z is meaningless or impossible or absurd”, i.e. it asserts that the propositions concerned (“X” or “not X”), or the concepts they involve, are faulty.

The reasoning process involved is thus the following: the major premises (or ‘horns’ or ‘prongs’), are intended to show that the two theses, “X” and “not X”, each leads to some proposition “Y”; the minor premise reminds us that these theses are mutually exclusive and exhaust all

available alternatives (it “takes the dilemma by its horns”), and the final conclusion is that only “Y”, their common implication, is left over for us. This form of argument is easily *validated*, for instance by contraposing the major premises, to obtain “if not Y, then both X and not X”; since “not Y” implies the paradox “both X and “not X”, it follows that its contradictory “Y” is true.

Note that the above dilemma is ‘two-pronged’, i.e. it considers two alternative theses, “X” and “not X”; it is also possible to – and Nagarjuna does so – engage in dilemmatic argument with three (or more) prongs in the major premise and a triple (or larger) disjunction in the minor premise. These have the form (briefly put):

“if A or B or C..., then Y;

but either A or B or C...;

therefore Y”

– and they can be validated in the same way<sup>12</sup>.

*Sometimes, Nagarjuna’s argument is not properly dilemmatic in form*, but only gives the impression that it is so. This occurs when the content of “Y” is merely “Z cannot be established as meaningful or as possible or as consistent” – i.e. when it signifies *a doubt rather than a denial*. Dilemma only works (i.e. can only be validated as just shown) if the major premises are proper “if/then” statements, i.e. provided “Y” is some *assertoric* proposition that logically *follows* “X” or “not X”. It does not work if “Y” is merely *problematic* given “X” and/or “not X”. The form “if X, surely Y” should not be confused with “if X, perhaps Y”; the former means “if

<sup>12</sup> *Reductio ad absurdum*: denying the conclusion while maintaining the minor premise results in denial of the major premise.

*X, then Y*” and the latter means “if *X, not-then not Y*”; the latter is not logically equivalent to the former, but merely a subaltern of it. Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of “if not *X*”, of course.

When one or both of the major premises has this less definite form, all we can finally conclude is “*maybe Y*” (i.e. the content “*Z might be* meaningless or impossible or absurd”) – which is the same as saying that we reach no final conclusion at all, since “*maybe Y*” can be said *ab initio* with regard to anything. At best, we might consider “*Y*” as inductively slightly more confirmed by the argument, i.e. the “*maybe*” as having incrementally increased in probability; but that does not deductively prove “*Y*”. Dilemma, to repeat, can only be validated if the premises are assertoric; it has no validity if either or both of them are merely problematic. Yet Nagarjuna, as we shall see, sometimes considers such pseudo-dilemma as equivalent to dilemma, and the *non-conclusion* “*maybe Y*” as equivalent to a *negative conclusion* “*Y*”. That is fallacious reasoning on his part.

## 2. Nagarjuna's privilege

*Drawn from Ruminations (2005), chapter 5:2-5.*

### 1. Making no claim?

The Buddhist<sup>13</sup> philosopher Nagarjuna (India, c. 150-250 CE) attacked every thesis he regarded as rational by every means he regarded as logical, and declared his own discourse immune from scrutiny and criticism, by saying (according to one translation):

“If I had a thesis, I would be at fault; since I alone have no thesis, I alone am without fault”  
(VV 29)<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Needless to say the following comments are not an attack on Buddhism, but on the rhetoric of Nagarjuna. Buddhism is not well served by such games. I think of Nagarjuna whenever I read v. 306 of the *Dhammapada*: “He who says what is not... and he who says he has not done what he knows well he has done... sinned against truth”. For me, he is just a philosopher like any other; his interest in Buddhism is incidental (as is his saintly status in the eyes of many).

<sup>14</sup> Nagarjuna in *Vigraha Vyavartani* (*Averting the Arguments*), verse 29. The translation used here is given by ‘Namdro’ in the E-Sangha Buddhism Forum (<http://www.lioncity.net/buddhism/index.php?s=d8946a5bcb1f56f3e9e21a108125823f&showtopic=5604&st=100&#entry82577>). Note however that the word “alone” in this translation may not be in the original, judging by other

The first aspect of Nagarjuna's statement is a brazen **claim to have no claim**. This is of course self-contradictory. Every proposition that claims to be meaningful and true (whether about some experience or about abstraction, whether positive or negative) is an assertion, a claim. To pretend making no claim even as one plainly makes one is a breach of the law of identity: it is denying that a fact is a fact.

There is no logical way to deny or criticize theses or methodologies of others without opening one's own discourse to evaluation. All denial or criticism is discourse, and all discourse is subject to logical review. To pretend the logical possibility of dispensation is dishonest (and if such pretense implicitly is bad enough, it is all the more dishonest if made explicitly).

Nagarjuna's discourse was, in fact (as I show in *Buddhist Illogic*), shock full of fallacious arguments, a mere parody of logic posing as logic. But he knew that people untrained in logic would fall for it, and he sealed their intellectual fate with the said eyewash claim. To neutralize further discussion, he misled them into believing he had simply shown up the logical absurdity of logic, and all doctrines based on it, but had himself posited no methodology or doctrine of his own.

Not only was his alleged refutation of reason full of errors of reasoning, but his concluding 'no-claim claim' was also a mockery of logic and sincerity. He, of course, just says 'I make no claim' – and he persistently denies that this statement constitutes a claim. I call that shameless psychological manipulation, motivated by one-upmanship. He cynically takes advantage of the

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translations I have seen, even though it does seem to be Nagarjuna's intent.

credulity of some people, to dominate them intellectually.

The second aspect of Nagarjuna's above statement can be viewed as a 'soft' version of the liar paradox, since he tells us: **everyone but me is in error**. Although such a statement is not in itself inconsistent (God could conceivably utter it truthfully) – it is logically open to doubt due to being *self-exempting*.

Effectively, it says: 'I am the only human who has knowledge; I know everyone else is incapable of true knowledge'. Only a fool is tricked by such an unsubstantiated claim to privilege. Reason regards all people as technically within range of knowledge given enough effort, even if they do not all fulfill their potential equally. Reason demands that discourse be reasoned and fair – i.e. based on *common general norms* as to how truth and falsehood are to be determined.

If Nagarjuna were basing his criticism of ordinary human means to knowledge on a claim to have attained a '*higher level*' of *consciousness* (i.e. Buddhist enlightenment or Biblical prophecy), we could not convincingly oppose him (being unable to prove or disprove such experiential claims). But he is not using such a claim as his basis – he is attempting to debunk reason through *ordinary* logical discourse. In that case, he is fair game for logic.

The statement of infallibility is then seen as manifest arrogance, a lack of respect for other thinkers. By saying 'I alone am exempt from any criticism' the author aggressively grants himself a special dispensation: he alone is endowed with the way to knowledge; everyone else is an idiot or a dishonest person. It is totalitarian, dictatorial speech.

Compare this dismissive 'you all know nothing', to the self-inclusive statement 'I (or we) know nothing'. The

latter – even though it implies ‘I know that I know nothing’ and is therefore self-inconsistent – is at least modest; so much so, that such admission is widely considered a mark of wisdom (and it is commendable, in modified form, i.e. as ‘I know *close to* nothing, very little’).

Self-exemption is a hidden form of self-inconsistency, because it resorts to *a double standard*. The one making such a claim presents superficially rational arguments against human experience and logic, but does not ask himself or tell us how he (an ordinary human) managed (using the very cognitive means he rejects) to attain such allegedly true knowledge. The author criticizes others, but does not equally well criticize himself.

This is a fallacious mode of thought often found among would-be skeptical philosophers. It comes in many subtle forms. It is wise to always be on the lookout for such practices, applying the reflexive test here demonstrated.

## 2. Plain trickery

Looking at Nagarjuna’s above statement in more detail, the following may be added.

To begin with, what is meant here by “***having a thesis***

And what is meant here by “*being at fault*”? This refers to making a mistake in the course of observation or reasoning, so that some thesis one has adhered to is in fact an illusion rather than a reality, false rather than true, erroneous instead of correct.

How do we know the status appropriate to a thesis? We know it (I suggest) by *holistic application of the whole science of logic to the totality of the data of experience*. Our concepts of cognitive right or wrong are themselves all constructed by logic and experience, without appeal to some extraordinary outside justification (like prophetic revelation or mystical realization, or simply the authority of some great personage or of a religious document or institution).

Now, Nagarjuna is evidently well aware of all that, but is intent on annulling the independent reliability of ordinary experience and reason. His strategy and tactics to this end, in all his discourse, as I have shown throughout my *Buddhist Illogic*, is to give the impression (however paradoxical) that logic may be invalidated by means of logic. And this twofold sentence of his, “If I had a thesis, I would be at fault; since I alone have no thesis, I alone am without fault”, fits neatly into his destructive philosophical programme. On the surface, this sentence might be construed as a single argument:

If X (a proposition is proposed), then Y (an error is made)  
 but not X (no proposition)  
 therefore not Y (no error)

Although the above apodosis is logically invalid, since it denies the antecedent to deny the consequent,

Nagarjuna is not above letting it pass without comment, knowing it will suffice to convince some people, although he is well aware that the logically trained will spot it and object. But for the latter audience, he reserves a subtler form of manipulation.

It has to be seen that the purpose of this famous Verse 29 in Nagarjuna's discourse is designed *to make a show of logical consistency*. He wants by means of it to give the impression that his anti-rational discourse is justifiable, that it has the stamp of approval of logic. Yes, he is actually attacking logic; but at the same time, he has to pretend to use it, because he knows this measure is required to convince people. For most people, a veneer of logic (i.e. mere rhetoric) suffices to put their reason's critical faculty at rest. We shall now see how he goes about this task.

The first part of Nagarjuna's statement, viz. "If I had a thesis, I would be at fault", is not intended (as some have assumed) as a justification for his overall discourse. It is not placed here in his discourse as an argument with intrinsic force, which directly buttresses or proves his philosophy. It is certainly not an obvious logical principle, or axiom, which everyone would agree on without objection, from which his discourse can be inferred or even generalized. No – it is itself an inference and application from Nagarjuna's main thesis, namely the claim that 'All human knowledge based on ordinary experience and reason is necessarily erroneous'.

The latter underlying claim is his major premise in a (here tacit) productive eduction, i.e. one that deduces a particular hypothetical proposition from a more general

categorical one<sup>15</sup>. This argument is formally valid, running as follows:

All X (opinions) are necessarily Y (erroneous);

therefore,

If this is X (a proposition is proposed), then this is Y (an error is made).

In this way, the first part of Nagarjuna's statement is made to seem something inferred, rather than an arbitrary claim. It is cunningly presented as an application of already admitted information, rather than as an isolated assertion. Granting the premise, the conclusion indeed logically follows (this is the veneer of logic) – but has the premise already been granted? No. Also note, once the conclusion is seemingly drawn, it can by generalization be used to reinforce the premise; although this is a circularity, it works psychologically.

Moreover, Nagarjuna manages through this implicit productive argument to pretend he is being consistent with himself: he is telling us, effectively: 'See, I am not just attacking other people's knowledge, but am prepared to apply the same stringent critique to my own!' This virtuous declaration is of course dust in your eyes, because he is not here putting the broader principle in doubt but merely reaffirming it. He has nowhere established that 'All propositions are false'. His is a pseudo-logical posture.

As the next part of his statement clarifies, he does not consider his discourse as falling under the critical rule he has formulated. The proposition "If I had a thesis, I

<sup>15</sup>

See *Future Logic*, chapter 29.3.

would be at fault” is a counterfactual hypothetical; his own discourse is never made into an issue open to debate. It seems open-minded, but it is a foregone judgment. His intention is to ‘avert all arguments’ and place himself at the outset outside the fray. He seemingly at first admits and then vehemently denies that his own discourse is a product of ordinary consciousness. This convoluted avoidance of cognitive responsibility has fooled many a poor soul.

Moving on, now, to the second part of Nagarjuna’s statement, viz. “since I alone have no thesis, I alone am without fault”. As already pointed out, this can be viewed as the minor premise and conclusion of an invalid apodosis in which the first part of the statement is the major premise. But we could also more generously assume that Nagarjuna intended a valid apodosis, using as its tacit major premise the obvious proposition: ‘If one has no thesis, one cannot make a mistake’.

It can be correctly argued that this premise was left tacit simply because it is so obvious to and readily granted by everyone. It is indeed true that if one ventures no utterance, thought or even intention, if one holds no opinion, makes no claim to knowledge, if one remains inwardly and outwardly silent, one will never make any errors. *For the status of truth or falsehood is only applicable to meaningful assertions.*

A stone is never in error, because it has no thoughts. Likewise, a thoughtless person may by his or her ignorance, blindness or stupidity make many errors of living, but makes no error in the logical sense of having proposed an inappropriate proposition. All that is so obvious (and vacuous) no debating it is necessary. The following apodosis is thus implicit in Nagarjuna’s declaration:

If not X (no proposition is proposed), then Y  
 (no error is made)  
 but not X (no proposition)  
 therefore not Y (no error)

This argument has a true major premise, as well as a valid form. This gives his discourse a veneer of logic again, helping him to persuade more victims. However, his minor premise remains well open to doubt, and decisively deniable! (As a consequence of which, his conclusion is of course also open to doubt.) He takes it for granted that he ‘has no thesis’ – but this claim is far from granted already. The tacit major premise acts as a smokescreen for the minor premise.

Moreover, note, although ‘being correct’ implies ‘not being at fault’, the reverse is not necessary. Nagarjuna suggests that his alleged faultlessness implies the correctness of his position, but it does not follow! Only if his criticism of all opposing theses was correct (which is by no stretch of the imagination true), and his thesis was not liable to similar criticism and was therefore the only leftover logical possibility, would such inference be drawn.

Nagarjuna does indeed ‘have a thesis’. His main thesis, the goal of his whole philosophical discourse, is as already mentioned the claim that ‘All human knowledge based on ordinary experience and reason is necessarily erroneous’. This, for a start, qualifies as a thesis – boy, it is a big skeptical thesis, full of negative implications. It is a principle of logic that *to deny any thesis is to affirm an opposite thesis*. His claim that his doctrine is not a thesis, in the minor premise here, is mere arbitrary assertion.

Furthermore, he ‘has a thesis’ every time he makes a specific assertion of any kind, including the assertion

under scrutiny here, viz. “If I had a thesis, I would be at fault; since I alone have no thesis, I alone am without fault”. Note that Nagarjuna thinks that making a negative statement is somehow ‘not having a thesis’ – but the polarity of a statement does not diminish the need for justification; if anything, one can argue that on the contrary negative statements are harder to establish than positive ones!

And we should strictly include as ‘theses’ of his not only such explicit statements, but also all the implicit assumptions and suggestions within his discourse (like the implicit major premise and resulting apodosis we have just highlighted). It makes no difference whether these explicit, or unstated and unadmitted, items constitute information or logical method, content or process.

For all these elements of discourse, be they spoken or otherwise intended, in all fairness fit in our common understanding and definition as to what it means to ‘have a thesis’. For none of these categorical or hypothetical propositions (except perhaps ‘if silence, no error’) is self-evident. They did not arise *ex nihilo* in Nagarjuna’s mind, ready-made and self-justified.

They are all complex products of ordinary human cognition, based on experience and produced by reason (even if, in Nagarjuna’s case, the mind involved is deranged). They undeniably together form a specific philosophy, a theory of logic, an epistemology and ontology. The mere fact that we can (as here done) at all consider and debate them is proof that they are ‘theses’.

The law of identity (A is A) must be maintained: facts are facts and it is no use pretending otherwise. Nagarjuna may eternally refuse the predicate of “having a thesis”, but we confidently insist on it. His arguments have in no way succeeded in averting this just and true judgment. Consequently, his doctrine is self-

contradictory. Not only does he ‘have a thesis’, but since his thesis is that ‘to have a thesis is to be in error’, he has (by its own terms) to be recognized as being in error.

Thus, to end it: Nagarjuna’s statement “If I had a thesis, I would be at fault; since I alone have no thesis, I alone am without fault” weaves a complicated web of deception. It misleads, by means of subtle ambiguities and superficial imitations of logic. Once its dishonesty is revealed, it should be decidedly rejected.

The mere historic fact that Nagarjuna is famous and admired by many does not justify hanging on to his doctrine *ad nauseam*, trying ex post facto to find ways to make it consistent with logic. Celebrity is not proof of some hidden truth – it is vanity. Most who do so are merely grasping for reflected glory. Anyway, attachment to authority is argument *ad hominem*. The religious and academic ‘groupies’ who gave him and perpetuate his authority are not logically competent, however numerous they be. It is a case of the blind leading the blind.

### 3. Non-apprehension of non-things

Nagarjuna defends his ‘non-thesis’ idea in the next verse (VV 30), describing it as “***a non-apprehension of non-things***” (according to one translation<sup>16</sup>). Now, this is a

<sup>16</sup> By Frederick J. Streng. The full text of his translation seems to be that posted in the Internet at: <http://www.orientalia.org/article491.html>. Note that the phrase “non-apprehension of non-things” is considered an incorrect translation by Plamen Gradinarov. However, while willing to admit the latter’s objection, I do not agree that Streng’s freer translation is entirely inadmissible. In my view, it may not be literally precise, but it captures Nagarjuna’s

very funny phrase. To the impressionable, it sounds very deep, pregnant with meaning. It seems to suggest this man has some privileged higher way of knowledge that goes beyond ordinary experience and reasoning.

But in truth, taken literally, we are all quite capable of “non-apprehension of non-things” and daily practice it, for the simple reason that non-things cannot be apprehended! Logically, this is all this phrase means, note well. What then is the old fox up to, here?

Nagarjuna is trying to project his ‘not having a thesis’ position as far as logically possible from our plebian ‘having a thesis’ – i.e. from ordinary consciousness, which consists in ‘the apprehension of things’. He has logically only three alternatives to choose from:

- the ‘non-apprehension of things’ (unconsciousness);
- the ‘apprehension of non-things’ (an otherworldly consciousness);
- or the ‘non-apprehension of non-things’.

Having a marked taste for one-upmanship and dramatic extremes, Nagarjuna of course chose the third of these terms as his vehicle. Even though the obvious sense of this phrase is puerile, it has poetic breadth and appeal. It seems to imply ‘knowledge without consciousness’ and ‘consciousness of the unknowable’ all at once.

Thus, his ‘non-apprehension’ is a mix of apprehension and non-apprehension, or something else again. And

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paradoxical spirit and intent. See our discussion of this issue at <http://nyaya.darsana.org/topic3.html>. In any case, even if the phrase “non-apprehension of non-things” is best not relied on, the criticisms of Nagarjuna in the present section can still be proposed on other grounds.

likewise, his ‘non-things’ are things of some sort as well as non-things, or perhaps something quite other still.

In other words, the negative terms in the phrase “non-apprehension of non-things” are not intended by Nagarjuna nor received by his disciples and students as mere negations of the corresponding positive terms, but as **paradoxical terms**, which may (in accord with the tetralemma schema) be all at once *positive or negative or both or neither*.

It is (and isn’t) ‘apprehension/non-apprehension of things/non-things’ all in one.

Nagarjuna stands out in the history of world philosophy as the most unabashed opponent of the laws of thought. Not only does he freely use self-contradictory or middle-including propositions, but he even makes use of terms loaded with contradiction and inclusion of a middle.

Now, some people might say: ‘what is wrong with that?’ They will argue: ‘the real world is extremely subtle and we can only ever hope to express it in thought very approximately; Nagarjuna is only trying to take this uncertainty into consideration within his discourse; the laws of thought are just arbitrary demands, making us force our thoughts into prejudicial straightjackets’.

But logical laxity is not the proper attitude in the face of an extremely complex and hard to express real world. It is precisely because of the great difficulty of the cognitive task at hand that one is called upon to be very clear and careful. Avoiding checks and balances on our judgments does not increase their efficiency but makes them less reliable.

In the case under consideration, if Nagarjuna does indeed have some privileged form of otherworldly consciousness, he can just say so. The laws of thought in no way forbid him to posit such a claim. He does not

need to beat about the bush, and pretend to have something unspeakable and not subject to peer review. He can and should be forthright, and defend his position in an equitable way like everyone else.

If he considers the terms ‘apprehension’ and ‘things’ to have some intrinsic logical flaw, he can argue his case openly; he does not need to engage in allusion, suggestion and fallacious argument. Most of us thinkers are open-minded and willing to correct our errors: if these terms are flawed, we are not attached to them; we are flexible, ready to modify or replace them as logically necessary in the light of new evidence and reasoning.

But Nagarjuna is like an accused, who when forced to appear in court refuses to admit his identity, or recognize the authority of the law and the judges, or plead guilty or not guilty, or argue the defense of his case. Worse still, in utter contempt of the court, he does not even admit his refusal to be a refusal – he calls it a ‘non-thesis’. Does that stop court proceedings or make the court declare him innocent? Surely not.

Nagarjuna misunderstands the nature of negation. He thinks that if one person says ‘X’ and another says ‘not X’, the onus of proof is on the first more than on the second. He considers that making a positive statement is more logically demanding than making a negative one. *He imagines in his confusion that saying ‘no’ is equivalent to saying nothing, i.e. to not saying anything.* Most logicians would disagree with him, and argue that any thesis put forward (even if only by insinuation) is equally in need of proof, whatever its polarity.

I would go further and say that, on the contrary, a negative statement is more demanding than a positive one. You can prove a positive statement easily enough, if you point to sufficient evidence in its favor. But how do you prove a negative statement? It is much more difficult, since negatives are not directly experienced

but are only experienced by way of the absence of positives. A negative can ultimately only be proved indirectly, by inability to prove any contrary positive.

Thus, in fact, not only does Nagarjuna's alleged self-limitation to negatives not exempt him from proofs, but on the contrary it increases the logical burden upon him. He is right in considering negatives as significantly different from positives, but he does not realize that the difference is to his disadvantage. He claims to have no epistemological or ontological basis, and yet to be able to reject offhand all theories of knowledge and reality. Such a grandiose fanciful claim surely requires much more justification than any other!

It should be stressed, incidentally, that Nagarjuna's "non-apprehension of non-things" should not be interpreted (as some do) as a defense of non-verbal meditative experience or insight. That is not the thrust of his anti-rational philosophy, although its avowed Buddhist affiliation may lead one to suppose so.

If Nagarjuna were a man deeply absorbed in meditation, he would not be writing philosophy. If his intent were to promote meditation, he would simply teach methods of meditation and not stir up verbal disputes. No – this man has philosophical ambitions. Allegedly, these are meant to put into words some of the 'reasoning' that he considered the Buddha to have gone through before attaining enlightenment. Nagarjuna assumes from the start that this 'reasoning' is necessarily anti-logical, a rejection of reason.

But we must see that this assumption is just a prejudice of his distorted mind. He was a philosophical revolutionary – one who believed that reason has to be overturned, to be transcended. But it is more credible to be evolutionary – and to consider meditation as a way for us to keep moving, beyond the limits of discursive

thought, without need to deny such thought within its applicable bounds.

To advocate respect for logic is not to foment endless babble, but rather to require that any thought arising be subjected to responsible cognitive evaluation. Logic is possible entirely without words, by means of silent intentions. Even in deep meditation, some sort of ‘reality check’ by means of logic occurs, and this need not involve any words. It is only by this means, no doubt, that a Buddha-to-be may steer himself well clear of common illusions and insane imaginings, towards to full realization.

Contrary to Nagarjuna’s belief, rationality and spirituality are not necessarily in conflict. Reason and meditation are potentially, to some extent, mutually beneficial. It is not thought as such, much less logic, but only excess of thought, particularly irrelevant chatter, which hinders meditative concentration and contemplation. A certain amount of appropriate thinking is often needed to initially position one’s mind for meditation.

#### 4. A formal impossibility

In fact, as I will now show, the sentence “If I had a thesis, I would be at fault”<sup>17</sup> is a *formal* impossibility. I earlier interpreted and symbolized it as “If X (a proposition is proposed), then Y (an error is made)”, giving the antecedent and consequent two separate

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<sup>17</sup> Two other translations of this sentence confirm and amplify this reading. “If I would make any proposition whatever, then by that I would have a logical error” (Streng). “Should I have put forward any thesis, then the logical defect would have been mine” (Gradinarov).

symbols, X and Y. But now let us consider these constituents more closely.

What does “making an error” mean here? It is not an ordinary predicate. The consequent Y does not merely refer to some error in general, but specifically to an error in the antecedent X. Y tells us that X is wrong. Therefore, Y formally implies the negation of X, i.e. notX! Granting this, Nagarjuna’s sentence now reads: “**If X, then not X**”, i.e. “If X is true, then X is false” – a paradoxical hypothetical proposition, whose conclusion would be the categorical “X is false” (as earlier suggested).

However, that is not the end of the matter. If we now consider the meaning of X – viz. “a proposition is proposed” – we may fairly suppose it refers to *just any proposition whatsoever*. In that case, the proposition concerned might even be the negation of X; so that we may substitute notX for X throughout the hypothesis. So doing, we obtain “If notX, then not notX”, i.e. “**If not X, then X**”, or in other words “If X is false, then X is true”. This is also, of course, a paradoxical proposition, whose formal conclusion is “X is true”.

We thus – by means of a universal reading of “having a thesis”, as inclusive of “not having a thesis” – now have, not only a single paradox, but a *double paradox*! That is, our conclusion is not only that X is false, but that X is both true and false. The latter conclusion is of course contrary to the law of non-contradiction, as in the case of the liar paradox.

This means that Nagarjuna’s statement is a formal impossibility: it is a contradiction in terms; it is not only false, but meaningless. It does not constitute legitimate discourse at all, let alone a tenable philosophical position or theory. The words or symbols used in it are logically not even conceivable, so it is as if he is saying

nothing. He seems to be saying something intelligible, but it is an illusion.

Now, it may be objected that Y does not necessarily mean that X *is* wrong, but could merely mean that X *could be* wrong. That is, “making an error” could be taken to mean that X is uncertain rather than definitely refuted. In that case, we would have the following two hypotheses: “If X, possibly not X” and “If not X, possibly X”; or in one sentence: “Whether X or not X is proposed, the outcome is uncertain”. Indeed, this more modal, ambiguous posture may well be considered as Nagarjuna’s exact intent (which some have interpreted as noncommittal ‘illocution’).

At first sight, due to the use of vague words or of symbols, this objection may seem credible and the contradictory conclusions involved apparently dissolved. But upon reflection, there is still an underlying conflict: to affirm X, or to deny it, is contrary to a position that neither affirms nor denies X. An assertoric statement (affirming or denying X) is *incompatible with* a problematic statement (saying X may or may not be true). One cannot at once claim to *have* knowledge (of X, or of not X) and claim to *lack* it (considering the truth or falsehood issue open). This is as much a contradiction as claiming the same thing (X) true and false.

Someone unacquainted with the logic of hypothetical propositions might now object that X, or notX, is only proposed hypothetically in the antecedent, and so may well be problematic in the consequent. But this is a logically untenable objection, due to the process of addition (described in the chapter on formal logic); i.e. due to the fact that “If X, then Y” implies “If X, then (X and Y)”. In the present case, this means: “If X is asserted, then X is both asserted and uncertain”. It suffices for the contradiction to occur conditionally, as

here, for the condition to be disproved; therefore, our conclusion *is quite formal*: “X cannot be asserted”. QED.

Someone could here, finally, object that the certainty in the antecedent and the uncertainty in the consequent may not be simultaneous, and so not produce a logical conflict. Such objection would be valid, granting that a thought process separated the beginning and end of the hypothetical proposition. However, in the case under scrutiny, Nagarjuna is clearly stating that in the very act of “proposing something”, one would be “making an error”; i.e. the error is nothing other than the proposing, itself. So, no time separation can credibly be argued, and Nagarjuna’s thesis remains illogical.

Note that all the present discussion has concerned only the first part of verse 29, i.e. the major premise “If I had a thesis, I would be at fault”. We have found this hypothetical proposition logically faulty, irrespective of whether Nagarjuna admits or refuses to acknowledge that he “has a thesis”. So, let us now reconsider this minor premise of his, and his conclusion that he “is not at fault”.

We have here introduced a new twist in the analysis, when we realized that “If X, then Y” (understood as “If X, then not X”) implies “If not X, then Y” (since the latter is implied by “If not X, then X”, which is implied by the former by replacing X with notX). So, now we have a new major premise for Nagarjuna, namely “If not X, then Y”, meaning: “If I do not have a thesis, I will be at fault”.

Taking this implied major premise with Nagarjuna’s own minor premise, viz. “I have no thesis” – the conclusion is “I am at fault”. This conclusion is, note, the opposite of his (“I am not at fault”). Thus, even though Nagarjuna boasts his thinking is faultless, it is demonstrably faulty!

For – simply put, leaving aside all his rhetoric – all he is saying is: “no thesis is true”; it is just another version of the liar paradox. And his attempt to mitigate his statement, with the afterthought “except my thesis”, is logically merely an additional statement: a particular case that falls squarely under the general rule. Moreover, before an exception can be applied, the rule itself must be capable of consistent formulation – and this one clearly (as just shown) is not.

Note lastly, none of this refutation implies that silence is impossible or without value. If (as some commentators contend) Nagarjuna’s purpose was to promote cessation of discourse, he sure went about it the wrong way. He did not need to develop a controversial, anti-logical philosophy. It would have been enough for him to posit, as a psychological fact, that (inner and outer) silence is expedient for deep meditation.

### 3. Philosophy and Religion

*Drawn from Ruminations (2005), chapter 2.19 (part).*

#### 1. Reason and faith

It is important to distinguish between religion (including philosophical discourse based on a particular religion, for apologetic or polemical purposes) and philosophy proper (which makes no direct appeal to premises from a religious tradition, though it may discuss religious issues).

This is a derivative of the distinction between faith and reason, keeping in mind that faith may be reasonable (i.e. without conclusive proof or disproof) or unreasonable (i.e. in spite of conclusive disproof). Note that reasonable faith is necessarily before the fact – for, if some fact is already indubitably established, there is no need of faith in it. Unreasonable faith is contrary to fact.

Some philosophers regard faith in pure speculations, those that are in principle neither provable nor disprovable (e.g. faith in the existence of God or in strict karma), as unreasonable. But I would class the latter as within reason, for it is always – however remotely – conceivable that some proof or disproof might eventually be found, i.e. the ‘principle’ is itself hard to establish with finality. Moreover, the category of pure speculation is even applicable to some scientific theories (for example, Bohr’s interpretation of quantum uncertainty as indeterminacy).

Religion is based on faith, i.e. on the acceptance of theses with insufficient inductive and deductive reasons,

or without any reason, or even against reason (i.e. albeit serious divergence from scientific conclusions based on common experience and logic) – on the basis of statements by some assumed spiritual authority, or even merely because one feels so emotionally inclined.

Philosophy, on the other hand, is based on personal understanding, on purely empirical and logical considerations; although some or many of its theses might well to some extent be hypothetical, or even speculative, they remain circumscribed by scientific attitudes and theories – that is, a sincere effort is made to integrate them with the whole body of experience and reason.

The difference between religion and philosophy is not always clear-cut, note well. Religion is not throughout contrary to reason, and philosophy is not always free of mere speculation. The difference is whether the credulity, or *degree of belief*, in speculative propositions is proportional or not to the extent of available adductive evidence and proof. In the case of mere faith, the reliance on a given proposition is disproportionate to its scientific weight; whereas in the case of rational conviction, there is an effort to keep in mind the scientific weight of what is hypothesized - one is ready to admit that "maybe" things are not as one thinks.

The two also differ in content or purpose. Religions are attempts to confront the problems of human finitude and suffering, through essentially *supernatural* explanations and solutions. The aim of religion is a grand one, that of individual and collective redemption. Philosophies resort to *natural* explanations and expedients, attempting to understand how human knowledge is obtained and to be validated, and thus (together with the special sciences) gradually identify ways and means for human improvement. There is still an underlying

valuation involved in the philosophical pursuit, note well; but the aim is more modest.

## 2. Different grounds

To make such a distinction does not (and should not) indicate an antireligious bias. It is not intended as a ‘secularist’ ideology, but merely as a secular one. Religion (or at least those parts of particular religions that are not decisively anti-empirical or anti-rational) remains a legitimate and respectable human activity – it is just recognized as being a different intellectual domain, something to be distinguished from philosophy so as to maintain a balanced perspective in one’s knowledge.

The reason this division was produced historically by philosophers was to protect philosophy (and more broadly, the special sciences) from being reduced to a supporting role, as the “handmaiden” of religion. It was necessary to make philosophy independent of religion to enable philosophers to engage in critical judgment, if need arose, without having to force themselves to be “religiously correct” or risk the ire of politically powerful religious authorities.

The secularization of philosophy was precisely this: a revolt against foregone conclusions imposed by religious authorities (i.e. people collectively self-proclaimed as sole torch-bearers of truth) as undeniable ‘fact’. It is important to understand *the logical rationale* behind such a revolt, i.e. why it is epistemologically valid and necessary.

*Anyone can stand up and claim* to have been graced by some Divine revelation/salvation (or holy spirit) or to have attained some Buddhist or Hindu enlightenment/liberation.

Many people throughout history have made such metaphysical claims. Some have gone so far as to claim to be a god or even G-d. Some have not made explicit claims for themselves, but have had such claims made on their behalf by others. Some of the claimants – notably, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and Buddha – have founded world-class religions, that have greatly affected the lives of millions of people and changed the course of history. Other claimants – like your local shaman, Egypt's Pharaoh, or Reverend Moon – have been less influential.

The common denominator of all these claims is some extraordinary mystical experience, such as a prophetic vision or a breakthrough to 'nirvana' or 'moksha' (enlightenment/liberation). The one making a claim (or claimed for by others) has a special experience not readily available to common mortals, on the basis of which he (or she) becomes a religious authority, whose allegations as to what is true or untrue are to be accepted on faith by people who have not personally had any commensurable experience.

The founding impetus is always some esoteric experience, on the basis of which exoteric philosophy and science are shunted aside somewhat, if not thoroughly overturned. The founding master's mantle of authority is thereafter transmitted on to disciples who do not necessarily claim an equal status for themselves, but who are pledged to loyally study and teach the founder's original discoveries.

Religion is essentially elitist, even in cases where its core experience (of revelation or enlightenment) is considered as in principle ultimately open to all, if only because of the extreme difficulty of reaching this experience.

In some cases, the disciples can hope to duplicate the master's achievement given sufficient effort and

perseverance. In other cases, the master's disciples cannot hope to ever reach their teacher's level. But in either case, they are the guardians of the faith concerned, and thence (to varying degrees) acquire institutional 'authority' on this basis, over and above the remaining faithful.

Thus, we have essentially two categories of people, in this context.

Those who have had (or claim to) the religious experience concerned *first-hand*.

Those who, *second-hand*, rely on the claim of the preceding on the basis of faith, whether they have institutional status of authorities or not.

Now, this distinction is not intended to be a put-down, a devaluation of either category of person. But it is a necessary distinction, if we are to understand the difference in epistemological perspective in each case.

From the point of view of a first-hand recipient, i.e. someone who has personally had the mystical experience concerned, his discourse is (for his own consumption, at least) pure philosophy, not religion. He is presumably not required to have faith, but all the information and reasoning involved is presented to him on platter. His task is simple enough; his responsibility is nil, his certainty total.

But a second-hand recipient has a difficult task, epistemologically. He has to decide for himself whether the first-hand teacher is making a true or false claim. He has to decide whether to have faith in him or not. He is required to accept an *ad hominem* argument.

This objection is not a judgment as to the master's veracity. Some alleged masters are surely charlatans, who lie to others so as to rule and/or exploit them; some of these remain cynically conscious of their own dishonesty, while some kid themselves as well as others.

But it may well be that some alleged masters are not only sincere, but have indeed had the experience claimed and have correctly interpreted it.

*But who can tell?* Certainly not the ordinary Joe, who (by definition) has never had the experience concerned, and in most cases can never hope to duplicate it – and so is not qualified to judge. Yet, he is called upon to take it on faith – sometimes under the threat of eternal damnation or continuing samsara if he does not comply.

How is the common man to know for sure whether some person (contemporary – or more probably in a distant past, who may even be a mere legend) has or has not had a certain mystical experience? It is an impossible task, since such experience is intrinsically *private!*

To date, we have no scientific means to penetrate other people's consciousness. And even if we could, we would still need to evaluate the significance of the experience concerned. Such judgments could never be absolute and devoid of doubt, but necessarily inductive and open to debate. Thus, the 'certainty' required by faith could not be rationally constructed.

It is no use appealing to witnesses. Sometimes two or more people confirm each other's claim or some third party's. Moreover, often, alleged authorities disagree, and reject others' claims. But who will confirm for us innocent bystanders that any of these people are qualified to authenticate or disqualify anyone?

Thus, faith is a leap into the unknown. However, it is often a necessary leap, for philosophy and science are not able to answer all questions (notably, moral questions) convincingly, and we in some cases all need to make decisions urgently. So, religion has to be recognized by philosophy as a legitimate, albeit very private, choice. In this context, note well, secularism is

also a religion – an act of faith that there is no truth in any (other) religious faith.

Note: Buddhism is today often painted as “a philosophy rather than a religion”, implying that it does not rely on faith. But this is a patently unfair description: there are plenty of faith loci within Buddhism. Belief in the wheel of reincarnation (*samsara*), belief in the possibility of leaving it (*nirvana*), belief that at least one man attained this Buddha state (Siddhartha Gautama), belief in the specific means he proposed (moral and meditative disciplines, notably non-attachment), belief in a multitude of related stories and texts – all these are acts of faith.

These beliefs require just as much faith as belief in the existence of God, and other more specific beliefs (starting with belief in the Torah, or Christian New Testament, or Koran), within the monotheistic religions. The adherent to Buddhism must take on faith the validity of his spiritual goal and pathway, *before* he becomes a Buddha (assuming he ever does). The end and means are not something philosophically evident, *till* he reaches the end through the means. This is the same situation as in the monotheistic religions.

So, Buddhism is not primarily a philosophy, but a religion – and to say otherwise is misleading advertising. The same is true of Hinduism, which shares many doctrines with Buddhism (as well as having some monotheistic tendencies, although these are not exclusive).

### 3. Wise judgments

It is important to remain both: open-minded, granting some of the claims of religions as conceivable; and cool-headed, keeping in mind some of them are unproved.

Intolerance of religion is not a proper philosophical stance, but a prejudice, a dogma. The true philosopher, however, remains sober, and does not allow himself to get carried away by emotional preferences.

Transcendental claims can, nevertheless, be judged and classed to some extent. Sorting them out is, we might say, the realm of theology (a branch of philosophy).

Some claims are, as already pointed out, directly contrary to experience and/or reason; if some harmonization cannot be construed, philosophy must exclude such claims. Some are logically conceivable, but remotely so; these are to be kept on the back burner. And lastly, some are very possible in our present context of knowledge; these can be used as inspirations and motivations for secular research.

Generally speaking, it is easier to eliminate false claims than to definitely prove true claims.

Each specific claim should be considered and evaluated separately. It is not logical to reject a doctrine wholesale, having found fault with only some aspects of it (unless these be essentials, without which nothing else stands). In such research, it is well to keep in mind the difference between a *non-sequitur* and a disproof: disproving premises does not necessarily mean their conclusions are false, for they might be deducible from other premises.

In choosing among religions, we usually refer to the moral recommendations *and behavior patterns* of their founder and disciples (as well as more sociologically, of course, to traditions handed down in our own family or society) as indices. If the advice given is practiced by those preaching, that is already a plus. If the advice and practice are wise, pure, virtuous, kindly, and loving, etc. – we instinctively have more confidence. Otherwise, if we spot hypocrisy or destructiveness, we are repelled.

(Of course, all such evidence is inconclusive: it suggests, but does not prove.)

But, however persuaded we personally might be by a religious teaching, its discourse cannot be dogmatically taken as the starting premise of philosophy. *To a first-hand mystic, it may well be; but to the rest of us, it cannot be.* Philosophy is another mode of human inquiry, with other goals and means. Spirituality and rationality are neither necessarily bound together, nor necessarily mutually exclusive. They might be mixed somewhat, but never totally confused.

Thus, if someone claims some mystical experience, or refers to authoritative texts based on some such foundation, his philosophizing might well be considered attentively and learned from to some degree, but it is ultimately irrelevant to pure philosophy; or more precisely such discourse can become in part or wholly relevant only provided or to the extent that it submits to the secular standards of public philosophy.

The latter can only refer to experiences and insights that can readily be duplicated, i.e. that are within everyone's reach (except a minority with damaged organs), if they but consider certain empirical data and follow a set of inductive and deductive arguments. It aims at developing, using ordinary language, a potentially universal worldview and understanding.

Admittedly, as some would argue, high-level philosophy (as with advanced mathematics or physics) is in practice not comprehensible to most laymen! Just as meditation or other religious techniques are not easily mastered, it takes a lot of effort and intelligence to learn and apply logic in depth. Moreover, the novice who enters the path of philosophy is as hopeful (full of faith in eventual results) as the religious initiate; and all along both disciplines, small successes encourage him to keep going.

So, one might well ask the embarrassing question: what is the difference between the elitism of philosophy and that of religion? Ultimately, perhaps none, or just a difference of degree! This answer would be true at least of reasonable religion. But in the case of unreasonable religion, we ought not allow ourselves to believe in it – even as a remote possibility – until if ever it becomes manifestly reasonable, i.e. until and unless our basic view of reality is indeed overturned by actual personal experiences.

#### **4. Right attitudes**

It is unwise to excessively compartmentalize one's mind and life; at the extreme, one may risk some sort of schizophrenia. One should rather always try to keep one's rationality and spirituality largely harmonious. Faith in religious ideas need not be an 'all or nothing' proposition; one can pick and choose under the guidance of reason. Reason is not in principle opposed to faith; it allows for its essentials.

The challenge for today's philosophers of religion, who wish to bring God and/or other religious ideas back into the modern mind, is to fully acknowledge and accept the current conclusions of modern science. It is no use trying to tell an educated contemporary that scientific claims – regarding the age and size of the universe, the evolution of matter, the age and history of our planet, the evolution of vegetable and animal life on it, the emergence of the human species – are all wrong! Such discourse is irrelevant to the modern mind, if not absurd.

There is still room, side by side with the worldview of science, for religious ideas – but these must inductively adapt to survive. This is always possible by exploiting (within reason) loopholes in the current scientific narrative, whatever it happens to be at any given time.

Instead of emphasizing conflicts, thinkers should seek out the conceptual possibilities for harmonization. Real scientists remain open-minded wherever there are lacunae.

## 4. Devoid of a self

*Drawn from Phenomenology (2003), chapter 5:5-6 and appendix 2.*

### 1. Fallacious criticisms of selfhood

Since writing *Buddhist Illogic*, I have been reviewing Buddhist arguments against selfhood more carefully, and I must say that – while they continue to inspire deeper awareness of philosophical issues in me – I increasingly find them unconvincing, especially with regard to logical standards.

Buddhists conceive of the self as a non-entity, an illusion produced by a set of surrounding circumstances ('causes and conditions'), like a hole in the middle of a framework (of matter or mind or whatever). But I have so far come across no convincing detailed formulation of this curious (but interesting) thesis, no clear statement that would explain how a vacuity can seemingly have consciousness, will and values. Until such a theory is presented, I continue to accept self as an entity (call it soul) of some substance (spirit, say). Such a self is apparently individual, but might well at a deeper level turn out to be universal. The individuation of soul might be an illusion due to narrow vision, just as the individuation of material bodies seems to be.

Criticisms of the idea of self are no substitute for a positive statement. It is admittedly hard to publicly (versus introspectively) and indubitably demonstrate the existence of a soul, with personal powers of cognition, volition and affection. But this theory remains the most credible, in that the abstract categories it uses (entity,

substance, property, causality) are already familiar and functional in other contexts. In contrast, the impersonal thesis remains mysterious, however open-minded we try to be. It may be useful for meditation purposes, but as a philosophical proposition it seems wanting.

Generally speaking, I observe that those who attempt to rationalize the Buddhist no-self thesis indulge in too-vague formulations, unjustified generalizations and other *non-sequiturs*. A case in point is the work *Lotus in a Stream* by Hsing Yun<sup>18</sup>, which I have recently reread. The quotations given below as examples are from this work.

“Not only are all things impermanent, but they are also all devoid of self-nature. Having no self-nature means that all things depend on other things for their existence. Not one of them is independent and able to exist without other things” (pp. 86-87).

Here, the imprecision of the term “existence” or “to exist” allows for misrepresentation. Western thought would readily admit that all (or perhaps most) things *come* to be and *continue* to be and *cease* to be and *continue* to not-be as a result of the arrival, presence, departure or absence of a variety of other things. But that is very different from saying that their *being* itself is dependent: for us, facts are facts, i.e. once a thing is a past or present fact, nothing can change that fact, it is not “dependent” on anything. Yet, I contend, Buddhists seem to be trying to deny this, and cause confusion by

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18 See in particular chapters 7-9. (The author is a Chinese Buddhist monk, b. 1928.)

blurring the distinction between change *over* different time and place, and change *within* identical time and place.

“The meaning of the word ‘things’ in these statements is all phenomena, both formed and formless, all events, all mental acts, all laws, and anything else you can think of.”

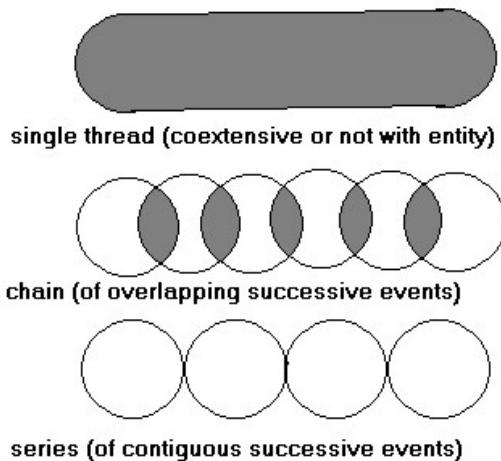
Here, the suggestion is that impermanence concerns not only phenomena, which strictly speaking are material or mental objects of perception, but also abstract objects. The terms “formless” and “laws” and “anything you can think of” suggest this. But of course such a statement surreptitiously slips in something we would not readily grant, though we would easily admit that phenomena are impermanent. The whole point of a “law” is that it is a constant in the midst of change, something we conceive through our rational faculty as the common character of a multitude of changing phenomenal events. The principle of Impermanence is not supposed to apply to abstracts. Indeed, it is itself an abstract, considered not to be impermanent!

“To say that nothing has a self-nature is to say that nothing has any attribute that endures over long periods of time. There is no ‘nature’ that always stays the same in anything anywhere. If the ‘nature’ of a thing cannot possibly stay the same, then how can it really be a nature? Eventually everything changes and therefore nothing can be said to have a ‘nature,’ much less a self-nature.”

Here, the author obscures the issue of *how long* a period of time is – or can be – involved. Even admitting that phenomena cannot possibly endure forever, it does not follow that they do not endure at all. Who then is to say that an attribute cannot last as long as the thing it is an attribute of lasts? They are both phenomena, therefore they are both impermanent – but nothing precludes them from enduring for the same amount of time. The empirical truth is: some attributes come and/or go within the life of a phenomenal thing, and some are equally extended in time. Also, rates of change vary; they are not all the same. The author is evidently trying to impose a vision of things that will comfort his extreme thesis.

We can, incidentally, conceive of different sorts of continuity of conjunctions of phenomena (see diagram below). An essential attribute of a thing would coexist fully, like an underlying *thread* of equal time length. A weaker scenario of continuity would be a *chaining* of different events, such that the first shares some time with the second, which shares some with the third, and so forth, without the first and third, second and fourth and so on having time in common. In some cases, continuity may be completely illusory, in that events *succeed* each other contiguously in time without sharing any time.

Figure 1. Three types of continuity



Hsing Yun goes on arguing:

"the body... is a delusion caused by a brief congregation of the physical and mental components of existence Just as a house is made of many parts that create an appearance, so the body... When those parts are separated, no self-nature will be found anywhere."

That a house or human body is an aggregate of many separable elements, does not prove that when these elements are together (in a certain appropriate way, of course) they do not collectively produce something new. The whole may be more than its constituent parts, because the whole is not just the sum of the parts but an effect of theirs. The bricks of a house do not just add up to a house, but together become a house when placed

side by side in certain ways; if placed apart (or together in the wrong way) they do not constitute a house (but at best a pile of bricks). Similarly for the atoms forming a molecule, the molecules forming a living cell, the cells causing a human organism. At each level, there is a *causal* interplay of parts, which produces something new that is more than the parts, something we call the whole, with its own distinct attributes and properties.

It is thus quite legitimate to suppose that when matter comes together in a certain way we call a live human body, it produces a new thing called the self or soul or spirit, which thing we regard as the essence of being human because we attribute to it the powers of consciousness and volition that we evidently display (and which the constituent matter in us does not, as far as we can see, separately display). That this idea of self is a hypothesis may be readily admitted; but to anyone conscious of the inductive basis of most human knowledge that does not constitute a criticism (all science develops through hypotheses). The important point to note is that Buddhist commentators like this one give arguments that do not succeed in proving what they purport to prove.

Here are some more examples, relating to the notion of “emptiness”:

“Dependent origination means that everything is produced from conditions and that nothing has an independent existence of its own. Everything is connected to everything else and everything is conditioned by everything else. ‘Emptiness’ is the word used to describe the fact that nothing has an independent nature of its own” (p. 94).

Here, the reader should notice the vagueness of terms like “connection” or “conditioning”. They are here used without nuance, without remark that very many kinds and degrees of causal relation may be involved. The impression made on the reader is that everything is *equally bound* to everything else, however far or near in space and time. But that is not merely untrue – it is conceptually untenable! Concepts of causality arise with reference to a specific relation, which some things have with each other *and some things lack with each other*. If all things had *the same* causal relation to *all* other things, no concept of a causal relation would arise nor be needed. We can *very loosely* say that the cause of a cause of a thing is “causally related” to it, but causal logic teaches us that the cause of a cause of a thing is not always itself “a cause” of it in the strict sense. And even if it is, it may not be so in the same degree. It follows that Hsing Yun is here again misleading us.

“Emptiness does not mean nothingness... all things have being because they all do exist interdependently” (p.97).

Here, the image communicated to us is that each thing, although in itself empty of substance, acquires existence through its infinity of relations (dependencies) to all other things, each of which is itself empty of substance. We must ask, is this theoretical scenario credible? Does an infinity of zeros add up to a non-zero? What are those “relations” between “things”? Are they not also “things”? Are they not also empty, in which case what gives *them* existence? The concept of relation implies the pre-existence of things being related (terms); if all that exists are relations, is the concept still meaningful?

Furthermore, what does interdependence (a.k.a. co-dependence) mean, exactly? Is an embrace in mid-air between two or more people equivalent to a mutual support? If I cannot support myself, can I support you? The notion is unconscionable.

“Nothing is unchangeable or unchanging. All phenomena exist in succession. They are always changing, being born, and dying.”

Here, the author has simply dropped out the (previously acknowledged) and very relevant fact of *enduring*. To convince us that the world is nothing but flux, he mentions birth, change and death – but eclipses the fact of living, if only for a little while! The phrase “they are always” does not necessarily mean “each of them in every moment.”

“A cause (seed) becomes an effect (fruit), which itself contains the cause (seed) for another effect, and so on. The entire phenomenal world works just like this” (p. 98).

Here, we are hastily dragged into a doubtful generalization. The description of the cycle of life, with procreation from generation to generation, does not necessarily fit other causal successions. Causation in the world of inanimate matter obeys its own laws, like Newton’s Laws of Motion for example. There is nothing truly equivalent to reproduction in it, to my memory. To convince us, the author would have to be much more precise in his analogies. Philosophers have no literary license.

“If we were to break a body down into its constituent parts, the body would no longer exist as a body.”

So what? Is that meant to explain or prove “emptiness”? If you kill an animal and cut it up, of course you will not find the life in it, or the consciousness it had, or its “animal nature”. It does not follow that when the animal is alive and well, it lacks these things!

“The meanings of the words ‘above’ and ‘below’ depend on where we are. They do not have absolute meanings. It is like this with all words and all relationships between things” (p. 99).

Again, a hasty generalization – from specifically relative terms to all words. Every grammarian knows that relative terms are just one type of term among others. That the former exist does not imply that the latter have the same character or properties. Similarly, Hsing Yun argues that the relativity of a word like “brightness” (our characterization of the brightness of a light is subjective and variable) exemplifies the relativity of all terms. But here again, he is passing from an obvious case to all cases, although many qualifications are based on stricter, scientific measurement. Moreover, describing how a piece of cloth may have various uses, as a shirt or as a skirt, he argues:

“It is the same piece of cloth in all cases, but since it is used differently, we have different names for it. All words are like this; their

meanings depend on how and where they are used.”

This is supposed to convince us that words are “false and wavering” and help us to better understand emptiness. But the truthfulness and accuracy of language are clearly not at stake here, so the implied negative conclusion is unwarranted. The proof is that we all understand precisely his description of the changing practical role of the piece of cloth. “Cloth can be used as shirt or as skirt” is a perfectly legitimate sentence involving the natural modality “can” and two predicates in disjunction for a single subject (A can be B or C). Of course, if one starts with the idea that language can only consist of sentences with two terms and one modality (A is B), then one will be confused by more complex situations. But if one’s understanding of human thought is more developed, one does not fall into foolish conclusions.

Lastly, Hsing Yun refers to “the relative natures of our perceptions” to justify the idea of emptiness. He describes two people watching a snowfall, one is a poet sitting in his warm house, the other a homeless man shivering outdoors. The first hopes the snow will continue to fall, so he can enjoy watching it; the second fears that if the snow continues to fall, he may freeze to death. The author concludes:

“Both are seeing the same scenery, but since their conditions are different they perceive it very differently.”

Thus, perceptions are “false” and emptiness “underlies” them. Here again, his interpretation of the situation is tendentious, designed to buttress his preconceived

doctrines. To be precise, the two people correctly perceive the (more or less) same snowy scene; what differs is their evaluation of *the biological consequences* of what they are perceiving (or more precisely still, what they anticipate to further experience). There is no relativity of perception involved! We have two quite legitimate sentences, which are both probably true “I’ll enjoy further snow” and “I’ll be killed by further snow”. “I” being the poet in one case and the poor man in the other case, there is no contradiction between them.

By arguments like those we have analyzed, Hsing Yun arrives at the overall conclusion that:

“The universe can only exist because all phenomena are empty. If phenomena were not empty, nothing could change or come into being. Being and emptiness are two sides of the same thing” (p. 100).

But none of his premises or arguments permits us to infer or explicate such conclusion. It is a truism that if your cup is full, you cannot add to it; or if you have no room to move into, you cannot move. But this is not what the author is here talking about; the proposed thesis is of course much more radical, though still largely obscure. All we are offered are dogmatic statements, which repeat on and on what the Buddha is claimed to have said.

I am personally still quite willing to believe that the Buddha did say something enlightening about interdependence, impermanence, selflessness and emptiness, but the words used were apparently not very clear. I just hope that his difficulty was merely in finding the right words to express his insights, and that the

reasoning behind those words was not as faulty as that I have encountered in the work of commentators so far!

Still, sentences like the following from the *Flower Garland Sutra* are deliciously pregnant with meaning, challenging us to keep digging<sup>19</sup>:

*“When wind moves through emptiness, nothing really moves.”*

## 2. What “emptiness” might be<sup>20</sup>

The following is an attempt to eclectically merge the Western and Indian idea of a ‘soul’ with aspects of the Buddhist idea that we are “empty” of any such substance. What might the ‘soul’ be, what its place in ‘the world’, what its ‘mechanics’? Can we interpret and clarify the notion of “emptiness” intellectually?

The Buddhist notion of “emptiness” (in its more extremist versions) is, as far as I am concerned to date, unconvincing. If anything is empty, it is the very concept of emptiness as used by them – for they never *clearly* define it or explain it. Philosophy cannot judge ideas that remain forever vague and Kafkaesque accusations. The onus is on the philosophers of emptiness to learn to express their ideas more verbally.

a. Imagine the soul as an entity in the manifold, of (say) spiritual substance, a very fine energy form

19 For instance, is there a state of consciousness in which one experiences space-time as a static whole?

20 This essay was initially written for the book *Buddhist Illogic*, but at the time I decided that it was not sufficiently exhaustive and consistent and did not belong there. I have since then improved it somewhat.

somewhat distinct from the substances of the mental domain (that of imaginations) and of the material domain (that of physical phenomena, regarded as one's body and the world beyond one's body).<sup>21</sup>

b. While solipsism is a logically acceptable proposition, equally conceivable is the notion that the soul may be one among many in a large population of souls scattered in the sea of existence, which includes also the coarser mental and material energies. These spiritual entities may well have common natures and behavior tendencies, and be able to impact on each other and become aware of each other.

Those many souls may conceivably be expressions of one and the same single Soul, and indeed mind and matter may also be expressions of that one Soul, which might perhaps be identified with (a rather Hindu viewpoint) or be a small emanation of (a more Jewish view) what we call God. Alternatively, the many souls may be interrelated more in the way of a network.

The latter view could be earmarked as more Buddhist, if we focus on its doctrine of "interdependence." However, we can also consider Buddhism compatible with the idea of a collective or root Soul, if we focus on its doctrine of an "original, common ground of mind." This refers to a mental ocean, whence all thoughts splash up momentarily (as seemingly evident in meditation). At first individual and psychological, this original substance is eventually regarded as universal and metaphysical, on the basis of a positivistic argument<sup>22</sup> that since even material sensations are

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21 Note that animists regard even plants and stones as spiritual.

22 As I make clear elsewhere, I am not personally convinced by this extreme argument.

known only through mind, we can only suppose that everything is mind. Thus, not only ‘thoughts,’ but all ‘things’ are mere turbulences in this primordial magma. Even individual ‘selves’ are merely drops of this mental sea water that momentarily have the illusion of separateness and personal identity.

c. For each individual soul (as for the greater Soul as a whole), the mind, the body, and the world beyond, of more matter, mind and spirit energies, may all be just projected ‘images’ (a viewpoint close to Bishop Berkeley’s in the West or Yogachara philosophers in Buddhism). This is not an affirmation by me, I am merely trying to demystify this theory and take it into consideration, note well.

The term image, here, does not signify image *of* anything else. Such images are perhaps media of self-expression and discourse of the soul (or Soul). That is, the ‘world around me’ may be a language the soul creates and uses to express itself and communicate with itself (and with other eventual souls).

Granting there are objectively many souls, we can observe that these souls have many (perhaps most) of their images *in common*. This raises an important question, often asked in relation to such Idealism. *If our worlds (including the physical aspects) are personal imaginations, how come so much of their contents agree, and how is it that they seem to be subject to the same ‘laws of nature’?*

One possible answer is to assume the many souls to be emanations of a central Soul (animal, human or Divine). In that case, it is no wonder that they share experiences and laws.

Alternatively, we could answer that like images just happen to be (or are by force of their nature and habits) repeatedly projected by the many souls. In this way, they

seemingly share a world (in part, at least), even though it is an imaginary one. Having delusions in common, they have perceptions in common. They can thus interact in regular ways in a single apparent ‘natural environment,’ and develop collective knowledge, society, culture, technology, ethics, politics and history. Thus, we are not forced to assume one common, objective world. It may well be that each soul projects for itself certain images that other souls likewise project for themselves, and these projected images happen to be the same upon comparison.

d. Viewed as a ball of subtle energy, the soul can well have its own spiritual ‘mechanics’ – its outer and inner shapes and motions, the creases and stirrings within it and at the interface with the mental and material (and spiritual) energies around it, the mathematics of the waves which traverse it and its environment, like a creature floating in the midst of the sea.

*Consciousness and will*, here viewed as different powers of projection, are the ways the soul interacts with itself and its supposed surrounds.

These wave-motion capacities of the soul, are naturally subject to some ‘laws’ – although the individual soul has some considerable leeway, it is not free to operate just any way it pleases, but tends to remain under most circumstances in certain fixed or repeated patterns. These (spiritual, psychological) ‘laws’ are often shared with other souls; but each of them may also have distinct constraints or habits – which gives each its individuality. Such common and individual ‘laws’ are their real underlying natures, as distinct from the image of ‘nature’ they may project.

In the event that the plurality of souls is explained by a single great Soul, there is even less difficulty in understanding how they may be subject to common

laws. On the other hand, the individualities of the fragmentary souls require explanation. Here, we must suppose either an intentional, voluntary relinquishment of power on the part of the great Soul (so that little souls have some ignorance and some freedom of action) or an involuntary sleep or weakness (which latter thesis is less acceptable if we identify the larger soul with God).

With regard to the great Soul as a whole, it may either be subject to limitations and forces in its consciousness and volition – or it may be independent of any such natural restrictions or determinations, totally open and free. Our concept of God opts for the latter version, of course – whence the characterizations of omniscient and omnipotent (and all-good, granting that evil is an aberration due to ignorance and impotence).

e. The motive and end result of theses like the above is ethical. They aim and serve to convince people that the individual soul can find liberation from the constraints or habits it is subject to, by realizing its unity with other individual souls. ‘Realizing’ here means transcending one’s individuality by *becoming aware of, identifying oneself with and espousing the cause of*, other entities of the same substance, or the collective or root Soul. Thus, enlightenment and liberation are one and the same. Ultimately, the individuals are to abandon individuation and merge with all existence, melting back into the original source.

This doctrine presupposes that the individual soul self-constructs, and constructs the world around, in the sense that it defines (and thus effectively divides) itself out from the totality. This illusion of individuation is the sum of its creativity and activity, and also its crucial error. The individual soul does not of course create the world (which is its source); but it produces the virtual world of its particular world-view, which is its own prison and the basis of all its suffering, its “*samsara*.”

Realizing the emptiness of self would be full awareness in practice that the limited self is an expression of the ignorance and stupidity that the limited self is locked into because of various beliefs and acts. Realizing the emptiness of other entities (material, mental and spiritual) around one, would be full awareness in practice that they are projections of the limited self, in the sense that such projection fragments a whole into parts. Ultimately, too, the soul is advised to realize that Soul, souls and their respective projections are one continuum.

Those who make the above-implied promises of enlightenment and liberation claim justification through personal meditative experiences or prophetic revelations. I have no such first-hand experience or authority, but here merely try to report and elucidate such doctrines, to check their conceivability and understand them. To me, no one making philosophical utterances can claim special privileges; all philosophers are equally required to present clear ideas and convincing arguments.

f. The way to such realization is through meditation, as well as altruistic and sane action.

In the framework of the above-mentioned Buddhist philosophy of “original ground” (also called “Buddha mind”), meditation may be viewed as an attempt to return to that profound, natural, eternal calm. Those who attain this level of awareness are said to be in “*nirvana*.” The illusion of (particular, individual) selfhood arises from disturbances<sup>23</sup>, and ceases with their quieting. The

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23 It is not clear to me how these disturbances are supposed by this theory to arise in the beginning. But this issue is not limited to Buddhism: for philosophers in general, the question is *how did the one become many*; for physicists,

doctrine that the illusory self is “empty,” means that we must not identify with any superficial flashes of material or mental excitement, but remain grounded in the Buddha mind.

For example, the Tibetan work *The Summary of Philosophical Systems*<sup>24</sup> warns against the self being either differentiated from or identified with “the psycho-physical constituents.” I interpret this statement (deliberately ignoring its paradoxical intent<sup>25</sup>) to mean that there is nothing more to the illusory self than these phenomenal manifestations, and therefore that they cannot be the real self. Dogmatic Buddhists provocatively<sup>26</sup> insist that no real self exists, but moderates do seem to admit it as equivalent to the universal, original ground.

Buddhist philosophers generally admit of perception and conception, but ignore or deny direct self-awareness. Consistently enough, they reject any claim to a soul (spiritual substance), since they consider that

it is *what started the Big Bang*; for monotheists, it is *why did God suddenly decide to create the universe?* A deeper question still is *how did the existence arise in the first place*, or in Buddhism, *where did the original ground come from?*

24 See Guenther, p. 67.

25 Having dealt with the fallacy of the tetralemma in my *Buddhist Illogic*.

26 Looking at the history of Indian philosophy, one cannot but notice the *one-upmanship* involved in its development. The concept of samsara (which I believe was originally intended as one of totality, albeit a cyclical one) was trumped by that of nirvana (again a totality, though beyond cycles), which was then in turn surpassed by that of “neither samsara nor nirvana, nor both” (the Middle Way version). Similarly, the concept of no-self is intended to outdo that of Self.

we have no real experience thereof. For them, the “psycho-physical constituents” are all we ordinarily experience or think about, so that soul must be “empty” (of anything but these constituents) and illusory (since these are not enough to constitute a soul). But this theory does not specify or explain the type of consciousness involved in the Buddha mind, or through which “emptiness” is known!

Another way to view things is to admit that there are three sources of knowledge, the perceptual (which gives us material and mental phenomenal manifestations), the conceptual (which gives us abstracts), and thirdly the intuitive (which gives us self-knowledge, apperception of the self and its particular cognitions, volitions and valuations). Accordingly, we ought to acknowledge in addition to material and mental substances, a spiritual substance (of which souls are made, or the ultimate Soul). The latter mode of consciousness may explain not only our everyday intuitions of self, but perhaps also the higher levels of meditation.

What we ordinarily consider our “self” is, as we have seen earlier, an impression or concept, based on perception and conception, as well as on intuitive experience. In this perspective, so long as we are too absorbed in the perceptual and conceptual fields (physical sensations, imaginations, feelings and emotions, words and thoughts, etc.), we are confused and identify with an illusory self. To make contact with our real (individual, or eventually universal) self, we must concentrate more fully on the intuitive field. With patience, if we allow the more sensational and exciting presentations to pass away, we begin to become aware of the finer, spiritual aspects of experience. That is meditation.

### 3. Feelings of emptiness

There is another sense of the term “emptiness” to consider, one not unrelated to the senses previously discussed. We all have some experience of *emotional* emptiness.

One of the most interesting and impressive contributions to psychology by Buddhism, in my view, is its emphasis on the *vague enervations* we commonly feel, such as discomfort, restlessness or doubt, as important motives of human action. Something seems to be wanting, missing, urging us to do something about it.

These negative emotions, which I label feelings of emptiness, are a cause or expression of *samsaric* states of mind. This pejorative sense of “emptiness” is not to be confused with the contrary “emptiness” identified with *nirvana*. However, they may be related, in that the emotions in question may be essentially a sort of vertigo upon glimpsing the void.<sup>27</sup>

Most people often feel this “hole” inside themselves, an unpleasant inner vacuity or hunger, and pass much of their time desperately trying to shake it off, frantically looking for palliatives. At worst, they may feel like “a non-entity”, devoid of personal identity. Different people (or a person at different times) may respond to this lack of identity, or moments of boredom, impatience, dissatisfaction or uncertainty, in different

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27 These emotions are classified as forms of “suffering” (*dukkha*) and “delusion” (*moha*). According to Buddhist commentators, instead of floating with natural confidence on the “original ground” of consciousness as it appears, a sort panic occurs giving rise to efforts to establish more concrete foundations. To achieve this end, we resort to sensory, sensual, sentimental or even sensational pursuits.

ways. (Other factors come into play, which determine just which way.)

Many look for useless distractions, calling it “killing time”; others indulge in self-destructive activities. Some get the munchies; others smoke cigarettes, drink liquor or take drugs. Some watch TV; others talk a lot and say nothing; others still, prefer shopping or shoplifting. Some get angry, and pick a quarrel with their spouse or neighbors, just to have something to do, something to rant and rave about; others get into political violence or start a war. Some get melancholic, and complain of loneliness or unhappiness; others speak of failure, depression or anxiety. Some masturbate; others have sex with everyone; others rape someone. Some start worrying about their physical health; others go to a psychiatrist. Some become sports fanatics; others get entangled in consuming psychological, philosophical, spiritual or religious pursuits. Some become workaholics; others sleep all day or try to sink into oblivion somehow. And so on.

As this partial and disorderly catalogue shows, everything we consider stupidity or sin, all the ills of our psyche and society, or most or many, could be attributed to this vague, often “subconsciously” experienced, negative emotion of emptiness and our urge to “cure” it however we can. We stir up desires, antipathies or anxieties, compulsions, obsessions or depression, in a bid to comprehend and smother this suffering of felt emptiness. We furnish our time with thoughts like: “I think I am falling in love” or “this guy really bugs me” or “what am I going to do about this or that?” or “I have to do (or not to do) so and so”. It is all indeed “much ado about nothing”.

If we generalize from many such momentary feelings, we may come to the conclusion that “life has no meaning”. That, to quote William Shakespeare:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.*

Macbeth (act V, scene 5).

Of course, we can and often do also react more positively, and give our life more constructive meaning. I believe this becomes possible *once we are able to recognize this internal vacuum when we feel it*, and make sure we do not react to it in any of the negative ways we unconsciously tend to react. Once we understand that this feeling of emptiness cannot be overcome by such foolish means, we can begin to look for ways to enjoy life, through personal growth, healthy activities, helping others, learning, creativity, productiveness, and so forth.

Regular meditation is a good remedy. Sitting quietly for long periods daily makes it easier to become and remain aware of emotional emptiness when it appears. Putting such recurring bad feelings into perspective gradually frees us from them. They just seem fleeting, weak and irrelevant. Life then becomes a celebration of time: we profit from the little time we have in it to make something nice out of it.

## 5. The self or soul

*Drawn from Volition and Allied Causal concepts (2004), chapter 16.2 and 16.3.*

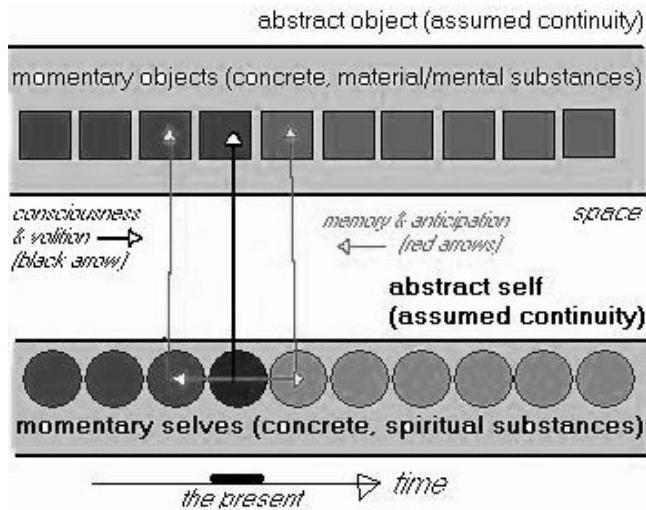
### 1. Abstract vs. concrete self

I finally managed to conceive (on a theoretical level, without making personal claims to the direct experience concerned) how the Buddhist idea of ‘emptiness’ of self (in subjects, and indeed in objects of consciousness) might be convincingly presented and consistently argued, when I read the following passage from *Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra*:

“A succession of consciousnesses, generating a vast array of distinctive perceptions, appear to consolidate into one individual consciousness” (IV, 5).

It occurred to me that the logical demands that every event of consciousness requires a subject (i.e. a soul being conscious) as well as an object (i.e. the content of consciousness), and that every event of volition requires an agent as well as an act, could still be met in the context of ‘emptiness’ of self, if we assume the schema in the diagram below.

Figure 2. How momentary subjects and objects give rise to abstractions



Note: This is a very rough illustration, to facilitate discussion. The self has no phenomenal qualities in our experience; so, all its spatial features here are merely symbolic. The drawing is not intended to assign a specific shape and size to the concrete or abstract soul (respectively, the successive circles and the virtual tube linking them together), since the self has no extension. Similarly, the space between the subject and object is not to be considered literal, since the self has no location or distance<sup>28</sup>. The black arrow signifies

<sup>28</sup> We roughly locate the self or soul in our body (including head), because it seems at the center of all our sensory experiences (behind the eyes, between the ears, in the

consciousness and volition, probing and changing objects external to the soul; while the red arrows are virtual representations of memory and anticipation reaching the past or future, respectively, through the continuity of the soul or at least the succession of soul moments (more on this further on).

As I have argued in *Buddhist Illogic* and in *Phenomenology*, consciousness has to be understood to signify a subject as well as an object. When something appears, it appears *to* someone. Otherwise, it merely exists – it does not ‘appear’. Patanjali seems to agree with the implied objectivist position, when he writes further on:

“But the object is not dependent on [people’s different] perceptions; if it were, what would happen to it when nobody was looking?” (IV, 16.)

Granting the existence of a subject of consciousness, and similarly of an agent of volition, – i.e. me in my case, you in yours – the issue arises: how is this entity known? It does not seem to manifest any phenomenal qualities, i.e. it is not perceivable by any of the material senses or in the analogous modes within the mind. Is it only, then, known by conceptual inference from perceived phenomena? No – I have argued in those works – this would not suffice to explain how we

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nose, under the tongue and the skin), and because our imaginations and verbal thoughts all seem to be going on inside the head.

routinely experience self-knowledge, i.e. our awareness of our *individual* acts of perception and conception, logical insights, choices and volitions, preferences and feelings.

Therefore, we must have *not just a general theoretical knowledge of the self, but direct access to it time after time*. Since this direct access cannot be subsumed under ‘perception’ – having no phenomenal evidence to rely on – it must be called by another name, say ‘intuition’. Furthermore, since the self, as subject (or as agent), has none of the perceptible qualities of objects (including acts), it should be distinguished from them with regard to substance. Whereas concrete objects (or acts) are labeled ‘material’ if sensory or ‘mental’ if imaginary, concrete subjects (or agents) are to be labeled ‘spiritual’ (souls).

Now, until the above-mentioned insight generated in me by Patanjali’s text, I assumed all this to imply that the soul needs be an entity existing continuously for some extended duration of time. In such case, the Buddhist idea that the soul is ‘empty’ of substance could not be conceptually expressed and logically upheld. But now I realize that a compromise position is possible, which reduces the apparent conflict between theoretical construct and alleged mystical experience.

This reconciliation is possible if we clearly distinguish between the intuited *momentary* existence of **concrete soul** from the assumed *continuous* existence of **abstract soul**. The same distinction can be made for the object – i.e. perception only reveals the object’s moment by moment concrete existence, whereas the apparent unity between its momentary manifestations is a product of abstraction.

It *suffices*, for logical consistency, that we posit a momentary, concrete spiritual substance being conscious *at that moment* of a momentary, concrete

material or mental substance; or likewise *at that moment* willing changes in matter or mind.

With regard to consciousness, the momentary soul may *at the moment of its existence* equally intuit itself, its own acts or tendencies (cognitions, volitions and evaluations), and also *past* moments of soul experiencing objects, self, etc. (insofar as such past is inscribed as memory in the present), as well as *future* such moments (by anticipation, i.e. by present imaginative projection). Similarly, with regard to volition, the momentary soul wills whatever it does at the present moment of its existence, and has no need of past or future moments to do so. All that is intended and hopefully made clear in the above drawing.

Each momentary self exists while in the present, but the next moment it is effectively another momentary self that exists. However, each momentary self, seeing at that moment its *unity of form* with the preceding and following momentary selves, gets the false impression that it is *one* with them, i.e. may identify itself with them as previous and later expressions or parts of itself. Thus, the illusory notion that it is spread over time arises – due to a confusion between the abstract self and the sum of the concrete selves. Similarly, mutatis mutandis, with regard to objects be they mental or material.

According to this viewpoint, we need only assume that traces of the past are carried over into the present through some sort of ‘memory’ inscribed in successive present concrete subjects or as objects somewhere in their environments. There is thus no logical necessity for us to assume that the different moments are bound together in one continuous *concrete* soul and in continuous concrete objects of consciousness. We can equally regard the apparent unities of subject (or of object) over time to be due to *abstract* commonalities between merely momentary concrete souls (or objects).

This is easy to grasp with reference to *the image of a wave at sea*. As ‘it’ rolls across the surface of the water, it visually seems like one continuous thing. But upon reflection, we know that the water composing the wave is constantly being replaced by water further on in its course. That is, contrary to appearance, the water constituting the wave does not travel along with the wave, but just bobs up and down. ‘The wave’ is thus just an abstraction, i.e. a mental projection by us based on perceived repetition of a certain shape over time.

But it should be pointed out that this analogy is not perfect. For, in the case of the wave of water, each successive water-content along the path of the wave exists before the wave passes through it and continues to exist after. Whereas, in the case of a subject or object in time, the present is the only position where existence is actual – the past having ceased to exist and the future being not-yet in existence.

Patanjali, in the initially quoted verse, seems to assume that time is actually divided into discrete ‘moments’ of some duration. This is apparently contrary to the assumption of modern physicists that time is an infinitely divisible continuum. The following verses seem to confirm that his position is that the continuity is illusory:

“The past and future are immanent in an object, existing as different sectors in the same flow of experiential substances” (IV, 12). “Their transformations tend to blur together, imbuing each new object with a quality of substantiality” (IV, 14).

And further on, more explicitly:

“One can see that the flow is actually a series of discrete events, each corresponding to the merest instant of time, in which one form becomes another” (IV, 33).

But I think it ultimately matters little in the present context whether we assume that time comprises a succession of separate events or a non-stop flow. For we can apply the above illustration and analysis in either case, i.e. whether we assume the series of circles or squares merely contiguous or infinitely overlapping. Perhaps we could explicate the ‘moment’ of Patanjali as the breadth of time that a given subject’s consciousness is able to span in one go. That is, perhaps time is continuous but our consciousness functions subjectively in discrete bits.

The important thing is that we may now accept *two* theses or theoretical constructs relative to the given data. One is that of ordinary consciousness, which presumes that underlying the abstract self is a continuous concrete entity (likewise, with regard to an abstract object).

The other construct is that claimed by Buddhists with reference to deep meditation, namely that no concrete continuity (but only a succession of discrete events) underlies the abstract continuity; i.e. that the apparent continuity is not real but illusory. Or in other words, that the abstract self (or likewise, the abstract object) is ‘empty’.

We need not at this stage judge between these two theories. What interests us is that *both are consistent with* the demand that consciousness imply both a subject and an object.

But in either case, the *concrete* soul is *not* ‘empty’ – there is at least a momentary entity beneath it. In other words, the ‘momentary concrete soul’ is the common

ground of both the ordinary mindset (which however unifies different moments into one ‘continuous concrete soul’) and the Buddhist claim (which rejects such unification, regarding the apparent continuity as merely abstract).<sup>29</sup>

Note well that no special logical doctrine needs to be conjured to explicate the claim that an abstract concept may not be underlain by a concrete unity. We have an example of this assumption in the ordinary view that a *class* concept or common name refers to a shared characteristic without implying (contrary to the Platonic idea) that it refers to an actual archetype suspended somewhere. This is by way of contrast to the *individual* concept or proper name, which is ordinarily taken to signify that all the objects it groups and labels are manifestations or facets in space and time of a single entity. The following is a more specific example:

If I think of ‘myself’ in the rougher sense, I include all the sensations felt at various times in different locations in my body, the sight of my skin, the sound of my voice, the thoughts in my head, etc. Although these factors are scattered in time and place, I regard them as ‘an individual’ called Avi Sion. Furthermore, each slice of my life is somewhat different from the previous: the air in my lungs, the food in my stomach, the blood in my veins, and so forth, are constantly on the move. Likewise, in space: no cross-section of me is comparable; organs differ, I move my arms and legs, etc. Even so, I ordinarily think of me as singular; i.e. the

<sup>29</sup> In either case, if we wish to support an ultimate monism, we can imagine all instances of subject and object, and the consciousness relating them, as ‘bubbles’ momentarily popping-up in an underlying unitary substrate of all existence.

abstraction ‘Avi Sion’ is in this case considered as referring to a concrete ‘sausage’ in space-time. Similarly, if I think of another human being or your pet dog or my car.

In contrast, if I think of the ‘classes’ with the common names ‘human beings’ or ‘dogs’ or ‘cars’, there is no intention (again, except for Platonists) to unify all instances into one big meta-individual. Thus, we commonly readily admit that there are abstract concepts without a single concrete referent, i.e. which merely intend a *similarity* between two or more concrete referents. The Buddhist proposition is simply that this latter understanding is also applicable to the case of ‘individuals’.

The discussion becomes more complicated if we more carefully consider the time factor. Firstly, in our above illustration, the arrow symbolizing consciousness and volition is perpendicular to time’s arrow; but that implies synchronicity, i.e. that these relations take no time to relate subject and (external) object, or agent and (external) act. It would perhaps be more accurate to suppose a delay, so that consciousness currently observes what is already slightly in the past and volition eventually affects what is still slightly in the future; i.e. we have two diverging arrows. But such supposition is problematic, since the premise of discontinuity is that no intermediate time exists, no being in between the moments shown; i.e. that the present moment is an indivisibly unity.

Secondly, we have too easily assumed that memory and anticipation can somehow function across time, even while considering each moment of time as essentially independent of the previous or next one. The above illustration suggests the pathway of memory to go through cognition of the past when it was present, coupled with a transfer of information from past subject

to now present subject. However, here again, with regard to retrospection, it would be inappropriate given the premise of discontinuity to propose that movement of information (communication) occurs from one moment to the next, with time's arrow. Similarly, anticipation cannot be considered as prospective or advance vision of the future itself, and yet when we mentally project a prediction (e.g. when willing), we intend it into a not yet existent future; this is even more problematic, seeming to imply movement of information against time's arrow.

In reply to such objections, some Buddhist philosophers would respond that there is no space and so no time delay between subject and object, since both are in one and the same “mind”; or again, that all moments of time are in fact one, being all illusions of that one and only “mind”. But less extreme Buddhist theorists would rather emphasize that the discontinuity thesis is not simply that concrete events (of subject or object) are in fact discrete, suggesting a succession of lawlessly spontaneous and unrelated happenings. No, there is still some sort of ‘continuity’ to take into account. It is the “karmic” component – the idea that each successive event in a series is *causally determined* by the preceding (and all environmental factors).

What this means exactly is open to discussion. It is debatable, for instance, whether freewill is allowed for or fatalism is implied. But more radically, if as Buddhists claim ‘everything is causally connected to everything’, the concept of causality loses all meaning, *since no distinction between causes and non-causes, or between types and degrees of causality, remains*. In short, while the idea seems plausible if we refer back to the image of a wave of water (where ‘energy’ – another abstraction, note well – is considered as passed on through the water), we are hard put to find a definition

or develop a detailed understanding of causality that would correspond to the Buddhist viewpoint.<sup>30</sup>

Another issue to consider is epistemological. Granting we never experience anything other than the immediate present, i.e. that reminiscences and anticipations are events in the present that suck us in and give us the impression of transporting us into past or future, the question arises how do Buddhists know about karma, i.e. that the present is an effect of the past and the future a consequence of the present? It seems to me that they can only claim an *adductive* legitimacy to their karmic interpretation – in other words, not much more than the epistemological basis of the ordinary assumption of continuous essences and souls! By additive, I mean given an empirical basis, to postulate a certain extrapolation from it, in the way of a coherent hypothesis to be compared to other hypotheses. That is to say, karmic theory is as much a ‘conceptual construct’ as the continuity theory it seeks to replace.

The thesis of discontinuity seems less credible to me than that of continuity, because it suggests that the whole universe (irrespective of its nature or size) instantly vanishes and then reemerges, or is destroyed and then recreated, at every moment. This means that instead of having to explain it once, we have to find a new explanation for it in every moment – and of course, we have no time for that in any one moment.

Moreover, we do not only need to explain the repeated *existence* of the universe, but its apparent *similarity* in any one moment to previous moments – for it always seems to contain traces of the past (e.g. footsteps in the snow, paleontological fossils, mental memories or

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<sup>30</sup> I discuss these issues in more detail in my *The Logic of Causation*, chapter 16.3.

photographic records) comparable to the present (e.g. you look like I remember you).

And finally, of course, comes the more complex issue of *causality*, to explain why similar entities in similar situations appear to behave similarly (*regularity*) and more difficult still, why some individual entities seem variously linked to individual events (*responsibility*). The thesis that there is some continuity across time thus requires less explanation; and being simpler, it is adductively preferable.

Thus, though all we experience of the self and the world is indeed momentary, the hypothesis of continuity remains conceivable and indeed more probable. The *epistemological* fact of transience of all phenomena and intuitions does not *per se* exclude the *ontological* possibility of certain continuities between them.

It is true that the ‘self’ especially has only a present existence, and no past or future within the present, since memories and imaginations (including projections of the future) are located outside of the soul, occurring in the mind and being stored in the brain. And indeed, even the soul’s present impressions of itself (by intuition), its mind (by inner perception) and its physical body and environment (by sensory perception), are open to considerable doubt, being often very transient and not always clear or memorable.

Also, since the soul has no information on itself or on the outside world within itself, there is some justification to regard past and future as essentially ‘illusory’, as the Buddhists do<sup>31</sup>. The latter term could be considered as somewhat hyperbolic, intending to stress the argument that they are *at best inductive*

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<sup>31</sup> The contemplation of this illusoriness is, I believe, called *samapatti*.

*constructs.* ‘The past’ so-called is constructed from present impressions of the present and apparent present ‘memories’ of some ‘past’ – but, judging by verification procedures in the present, the alleged past is *often* more fantasy and self-delusion than a fair estimate of what was. Similarly, and all the more so in the case of ‘the future’, which not only refers to the apparent past and present, but to incipient intentions of one’s own and others’ wills (which may or not be finally carried out).

However, such reasonable doubts that can be raised about the present, past and future of the self and its surrounds, cannot be reasonably be taken to an extreme, for the simple reason that that would make the statement of doubt logically self-contradictory. Therefore, we must admit that wherever consciousness occurs, it is based on *some* certainties, which does not necessarily mean total certainty. The inductive constructs that make up most of our ‘knowledge’ can indeed be erroneous, but it must be admitted (to remain consistent) that they progressively tend to truth.

## 2. About the soul

The soul is what we regard as the essence of a person, the unitary substance that is both subject of consciousness and agent of volition. This soul need only be present during the life of the physical organism sustaining it, not before or after.

Ontologically, whether the soul is perishable or imperishable does not seem relevant to our study of its cognitive, volitional and evaluative capacities. Epistemologically, how would we know it as a fact either way? If there is no contradiction in either concept, and no evident immediate knowledge of it, we must revert to generalizations and hypotheses to establish it. From a philosophical point of view, the soul may be

either short-lived or undying; equally. Some souls may be short-lived to different degrees (animals, humans), some undying (God's at least). There is no law of causality, nor law of knowledge, requiring all subjects or agents to be imperishable or to age equally.

Mortality does seem more empirically justified – in that people and animals evidently are observed to physically die. If the soul is an epiphenomenon of matter, it is probably mortal. Immortality implies literally an eternity of existence, and not merely life after death for some time; this seems a very unlikely hypothesis, unless we refer to the religious thesis that the soul originates in God and eventually merges back into Him, or similar ideas. The issue remains forever (i.e. so long as we exist) open, speculative.<sup>32</sup>

I am not sure Judaism (at its Biblical core, at least) and allied religions ultimately believe in immortality, though they may believe in some transmigration, or at least in the ultimate resurrection of the dead. The ‘messianic age’ is projected as a period of happy existence for differentiated individuals, rather than as a nirvana wherein all will fuse with God. Just as at some past time, God was alone, so at some future time, He will again be alone: only He (or His Soul, pronoun and noun having one and the same referent) is Eternal. But on the other hand, logically, just as we came from God

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<sup>32</sup> Note that my position concerning knowledge of the existence of God is that we can neither prove nor disprove it; on this topic, see my *Judaic Logic*, chapter 14. My views concerning how we ordinarily arrive at knowledge of the nature of God are expounded in *Phenomenology*, chapter 9. Note that I make no claim that anyone has attained to prophetic knowledge, though I keep an open mind relative to this notion.

before we got to Eden, perhaps after the messianic age we shall indeed eventually return to Him.

The philosophical position concerning the soul adopted in this volume is that it is either directly intuited by itself, or at least implied by its functions of cognition, volition and valuation, some of which are certainly directly intuited (i.e. experienced, although not as concrete phenomena). We could refer this position to the Cartesian “*cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am), if we understand the term ‘thought’ broadly enough, as referring to the three functions. Epistemologically, I infer that I am, due to having experiences, using logic and forming concepts (cognition), intending or doing actions (volition) and expressing preferences (valuation). Ontology reverses this order, acknowledging the self as logically prior to any and all such ‘thoughts’, as their implied subject or agent.

The notion of a soul no doubt has a history. I do not claim to know it, can only roughly guess at it. The idea of a personal soul is thought by historians to be rather recent – dating apparently from the time humans started burying their dead, or otherwise ritually disposing of them. Much later, philosophers (notably Aristotle<sup>33</sup>) developed the hierarchical distinction between vegetative soul, animal soul and human soul. The first level of soul (involving birth, nutrition, reproduction, growth, decay, death) was found in plants, beasts and

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<sup>33</sup> This distinction was later adopted by Jewish mystics, using the terms *ruach*, *nefesh* and *neshamah* (although they seem to interpret them in very divergent ways, however convenient – probably because the terms are not clearly defined, and seemingly interchangeable, in the Bible, from which they are drawn). Similar ideas are found in other cultures, but here again I can only guess the history.

humans; the second level (involving locomotion and sensation), only in the latter two; and the third level (involving reason, and exceptional liberty), only in the last.

Buddhism (or at least some currents of it), distinctively, denied the real existence of a soul, considering the ‘self’ apparently at the center of the individual’s consciousness as an illusion<sup>34</sup>. According to the mentalist school (Yogacara), the apparent self is based on eight modes of consciousness – the five due to sensory perceptions; the mental faculty correlating and interpreting them (like the ‘common sense’ of Aristotle); and two more. The seventh mode (called *manas*) refers to the deluded impression of having a separate self, giving rise to conceit, selfishness, and

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<sup>34</sup> Although, if we examine some of the arguments put forward in support of the no-self claim, their illogic is glaring! This is particularly true of the pseudo-reasoning of the foremost philosopher of the Madhyamika school, the Indian Nagarjuna (2<sup>nd</sup> Cent. CE). To give an example I recently came across in a book by the Dalai Lama (pp. 54-5): “The Vaibhashikas therefore understand final nirvana in terms of the total cessation of the individual. A well-known objection by Nagarjuna... [if so] no one ever attains nirvana, because when nirvana is attained the individual ceases to exist.” Nagarjuna is a joker, who likes to play with words (see my *Buddhist Illogic* for many more examples). He here suggests that ‘attainment’ is only conceivable through alteration (where the subject remains essentially the same, while changing superficially). But it is logically quite conceivable that the individual disappears upon crossing over into nirvana: that would simply be a case of mutation (where the one-time subject becomes something else entirely at a later time). There is nothing absurd in the said Vaibhashika position. (Note incidentally that that position is analogous to the theistic idea of merging back into God, mentioned higher up.)

similar afflictions. The eighth mode (called *citta* or *alayavijnana*) is considered the repository of ‘*karma*’, making possible the delays in consequences of actions. Thus, the ‘seventh consciousness’ may roughly be equated to the ordinary concept of present soul, although it is declared illusory<sup>35</sup>; and the ‘eighth consciousness’ may be ultimately compared to the religious concept of a soul that passes on from body to body, although a carryover of potentiality is implied rather than perpetuation of actual existence.

### 3. About the divine

This series might be completed by the notion of the ‘original ground’ or ‘causal ground’ of consciousness and existence, the Nirvana of one-mind and no-mind – which could be considered as related to our concept of God. Although Buddhists would likely deny it, the analogy seems to be apposite, because it shows the recurrence and uniformity of certain concepts in all human cultures.

Another Indian culture, Hinduism, as well as other peoples and philosophies, consider God more frankly as the Soul of the universe, the common root of all particular souls. In Judaism and sister religions, God is projected as a conscious Presence overseeing (in a cognitive and volitional sense, and in the evaluative sense of lawgiver) the whole world, much as each of us has a soul reigning over his or her own little world.

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<sup>35</sup> The accusation of illusion is due to their considering the notion of self as a product of conception *from mental and sensory perceptions* (i.e. *dharma*s, phenomena), rather than as I propose as something known by direct self-intuition (i.e. experience with a *non-phenomenal* content).

Some suggest, as already mentioned, that our own soul is but a spark<sup>36</sup> out of God's.

Some consider God as transcendent, others as immanent. The latter end up equating God with Nature, in the way of pantheism (Baruch Spinoza comes to mind, here). The human belief in God may have historically developed out of animism, itself probably a generalization of the vague notion of a personal soul.

Peoples living close to Nature (the Indians of North America, for instance) tended to perceive an *undifferentiated* godliness in all life and indeed in all of nature. Everything had a soul—a bubbling stream or a roaring ocean, a majestically immovable mountain, a pebble rolling downhill, the Sun, the Moon, the vast sky, one day blue, one day grey and rainy, rolling clouds and thunder in the sky, the wind brushing though the forest, a bud flowering, a soaring eagle, a roaming cougar, field mice scattering, a fish jumping up. God was everywhere to be seen and encountered.

Such ideas may have in time become concretized, with the notion of *discrete* “spirits” residing in a stone or tree or river or mountain. Each thing was thought to have consciousness and volition, just as people intuited these powers within themselves (probably long before they named them). People might then seek to talk with bodies of inanimate matter as with animals; for instance, to respectfully ask permission to interact with them in some way. Or they might have to trick or fight them into doing what they wished them to. Eventually, these small, scattered “gods” were taken home or at least represented in stone or wooden idols (as apparently in Africa).

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<sup>36</sup> The idea of a ‘spark’ is drawn from Lurianic kabbalistic philosophy.

Some gods, like perhaps those of Nordic peoples, may of course have evolved out of historical persons – kings or heroes who were remembered in stories and eventually became larger-than-life myths. Later, as in Greece and Rome, more abstract gods evolved, who represented broad domains of the world (like the heavens or the sea) or of human activity (like love or war).

Eventually, apparently thanks to the Hebrews, *monotheism* was born, i.e. belief in a single and sole universal spiritual God. Founded by the patriarch Abraham, Judaism became a more organized national religion a few centuries later<sup>37</sup>. Eventually, through Christianity and Islam, both much later offshoots of Judaism, abstract monotheism gained ascendancy in large parts of the world. Christianity is closer to Judaism than Islam in some respects, further in others. The former is more explicitly rooted in Judaic textual details, whereas the latter uses them more as a tacit springboard. Christianity retains some concrete ideas and images relative to its founder Jesus, while Islam like Judaism eschews all such deification or representation.

Still today, in India for instance, the pantheon of gods and the ubiquity of images of them is striking. Although Hinduism has also long ago reached the idea of abstract monotheism, it has not made it exclusive. Buddhism, for its part, attained a high level of abstraction, but without personalizing it as God (at least not originally, although

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<sup>37</sup> A more concrete ‘monotheistic’ religion, consisting of worship of the Sun exclusively, appeared briefly in Egypt at about that time. But the question is, who inspired whom? It is certainly equally conceivable that a small foreign contingent (Hebrew slaves) culturally influenced the larger host (some of the Egyptians).

many Buddhist offshoots have in practice identified the founder Buddha with God). This is consistent with the Buddhist doctrine that even the human soul is ultimately “empty” of personality. However, Buddhists have remained influenced by ancient idolatry, in view of the statues of Buddha they worship (and thus mentally project ‘soul’ into, note)<sup>38</sup>.

Jewish monotheism is not about God being the Soul of Nature. Nature (*hateva*) is sometimes said to be one of the ‘names’ of God – but this is taken to mean (e.g. by Maimonides) that Nature is in God’s power. In Judaism, God is *absolutely abstract and without any concrete manifestation whatsoever* – no incarnation in human or any other form, and nothing that can be represented by an image. Or more precisely, God is purely spiritual and never material. He is nevertheless the Creator of the world of nature, and remains all-knowing and all-powerful in it. Omniscient – not merely in the sense of knowing generalities (as Aristotle suggested), but also in the sense of knowing every particular; and thus able to exercise providence down to the last detail – as befits omnipotence.

This is analogous to the human soul, which has no phenomenal aspects<sup>39</sup> of its own, although it is capable

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<sup>38</sup> To be fair, it may be that in the minds of some practitioners of meditation, statues and flat images are not objects of worship, but mere aids to achieving the depicted stillness, silence and concentration. One would have to ask individual practitioners what their real intentions are. All the same, it would seem likely that someone starting with imitation in mind, will develop an emotional attachment to the representative object and end up personifying it and bowing down to it. Which, to my mind, is silly, to say the least.

<sup>39</sup> In this respect, Judaism has similarities to Buddhism; although unlike the latter, the former recognizes a non-

of knowing and interacting with the phenomenal world. However, the analogy is not total, since Judaism teaches that the world is not God's body, and moreover that humans did not create their own bodies but God created both their bodies and their souls (Genesis 2:7):

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

So, it is conceivable to Jews that whereas God is eternal, humans are not; and it is also conceivable that God's ‘breathing life’ into us was animating our bodies with a bit of His eternal Soul.

As these reflections show, the histories of the notion of soul and of that of God are closely intertwined. One of the functions of religion and/or metaphysics is to propose origins for soul and God, and explain how they are known.

Catholic Christians, to varying degrees, use *material* representations of Jesus in their homes, churches and processions. This may historically be an inheritance from the representation and worship of Roman emperors, which was widespread and seemed normal in the world Christianity took over. Protestants, later on and for various (political as well as spiritual) reasons, have for the most part eschewed three-dimensional sculptures and dolls, but they still resort to *mental* representations as well as to two-dimensional pictures.

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phenomenal ‘spiritual’ substance for soul. Another possible analogy is that between the “*Ayin*” (non-existence, nothingness) of Jewish kabbalah and the “*Shunyata*” (emptiness) of Buddhism.

Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism similarly resort to incarnations of numerous divinities, giving them bodily form or thinking of them concretely.

These are *perceptual* ideas about divinity. Judaism, and later on Islam, on the basis of the narratives in their scriptures (the Torah and the Koran, respectively) ascribe perceptible *behavior* to God, in the way of manifest miracles (if only the sending of an angel or a prophetic vision, or the decree of a legal system), but they exclude any physical or mental representation of God, which they reprove as “idolatrous”. The idea(s) of God transmitted by their holy books, and later reinforced by interpretative commentaries, are essentially *conceptual*.

As philosophers we might ask: what is the rationale for the worship of statues or other representations? Does the worshipper consider that material (or mental) object itself to be what he or she is worshipping (fetishism), or to contain the divinity aimed at or be an emanation of it or a channel to it – or does the concrete object at hand merely serve as a mnemonic or as an expedient means to focus personal attention on a divinity far beyond it?

One would have to enter people’s minds to find out for sure (for their own introspections and oral reports are not necessarily reliable). I would suspect that there is a wide range of attitudes in different people, some imagining a more literal interpretation, others being more conscious of the possible distinctions. The spiritual issue is: does this practice ‘weigh down’ the soul, preventing it from ‘rising’ to the formless?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The essential purpose of idolatry, I would say, is to *imprint* people’s minds with alleged representations of gods or God. It is a powerful form of advertising, which produces psychic dependence on the idol, so that it is voluntarily or

I should add that I personally suspect that people who believe in some incarnation(s) of God, or in narrow gods or idols, and even atheists or agnostics, *often or at least occasionally* lift their eyes and prayers to the heavens, effectively intending to appeal to or thank God. That is to say, adherence in principle to some non- or not-quite monotheistic doctrine does not exclude the occasional intuition and practice of monotheism. The issue here is not the culturally specific name given to the Deity, or the theoretical constructions usually associated with that name, but the actual intention of the praying soul at the moment concerned. I think all or most humans have that understanding and reaction in common.

Philosophical theism or theology offers no narrative, no stories, concerning God; it is therefore, of course, free of any concrete representations. It consists of frank, changing *speculations* of a general sort, as to whether *in the context of ordinary human cognitive faculties* an abstract God can be definitely known to exist – or for that matter, not to exist.

Extraordinary forms of knowledge (allegedly attained, for instances, through prophecy or meditation) are not inconceivable, but hard to prove to us ordinary people; they therefore remain speculations. Honest philosophers have no prejudice on the subject, and freely admit room for doubt. Nevertheless, they find it possible to formulate consistent theories, which *might* be true about God and soul. On this basis, though no dogma is allowed, various *personal faiths* are possible.

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involuntarily recalled and appealed to in various circumstances. This incidentally benefits the clerical class tending and serving the idol; although, to be fair, the members of that class are rarely hypocritical, but themselves true (indeed, usually truer) believers.

In this way, without imposing any particular religious doctrine, philosophy may yet save the fact of religion from annihilation by pseudo-thinkers. Here, religion is denuded of all extraneous material (that which has made it disreputable), and limited to certain essential propositions given credence through philosophical discourse. The spiritual dimension of human existence is thus confirmed and reaffirmed.

## 6. “Everything causes everything”

*Drawn from Buddhist Illogic (2002), chapter 8 (part) and The Logic of Causation (2003), chapter 10.1 (part) and 16.3.*

One doctrine fundamental to Buddhism is the idea that ‘everything causes everything’, or ‘everything is caused by everything’. This is the idea of universal codependence (or interdependence); it is the idea that nothing exists independently of anything else, that all things depend for their existence on *all* other things. This is, note well, a more radical thesis than the claim, commonly found in most Western philosophies, that ‘everything has a cause (or a set of causes)’.

On the surface, the Buddhist notion of universal causation seems conceivable, if not profound. However, upon reflection it is found to be logically impossible – i.e. utter nonsense. This is made evident in the following excerpts from past books.

### 1. The idea of co-dependence

The Buddhist idea of ‘co-dependence’ might be stated broadly as *each thing exists only in relation to others*; and furthermore, since each other thing in turn exists only in relation to yet others, *each thing exists in relation to all the others*. The relation primarily intended here is causality, note. We tend to regard each thing as capable of solitary existence in the universe, and ignore or forget the variegated threads relating it to other things. We ‘do not see the forest for the trees’, and

habitually focus on individual events to the detriment of overview or long view.

For example, consider a plant. Without the sunlight, soil and water it depends on, and without previous generations of the same plant and the events that made reproduction possible and the trajectories of each atom constituting and feeding the plant, and without the cosmic upheavals that resulted in the existence of our planet and its soil and water and of the sun and of living matter, and so forth *ad infinitum*, there would be no plant. It has no independent existence, but stands before us only by virtue of a mass of causes and conditions. And so with these causes and conditions, they in turn are mere details in a universal fabric of being.

The concept of co-dependence is apparently regarded by Buddhists as an inevitable outcome of the concept of causality. But reflection shows, again, that this doctrine is only a particular thesis within the thesis of causality. That is, though co-dependence implies causality, causality does not imply co-dependence. Moreover, it is a vague thesis, which involves some doubtful generalizations. The above-cited typical example of co-dependence suggests three propositions:

- everything has a cause (or is an effect),
- everything has an effect (or is a cause);

and perhaps the more radical,

- everything causes and is caused by everything.

The first two propositions are together what we call '**the law of causality**'. It has to be seen that these propositions do not inevitably follow from the concept of causality. The latter only requires for its formation that *some* regularity of co-existence between events be found in experience, but does not in itself necessitate that *every* event in experience be found to have regular

co-existence with some other event(s). The *concept* of causality is valid if it but has particular applications; the *law* of causality does not automatically follow – it is merely a *generalization* from some experiences with this property to all existents. There may well be things not found to have regular co-existents, and thence by generalization assumed to have no cause and/or no effect. A universe in which both causality and non-causality occur is quite conceivable. Furthermore, the first proposition does not logically imply the second or vice versa – i.e. we may imagine things with causes but no further effect, and things with effects but no preceding causes.

“Early Buddhists”, Cheng tells us, “believed in the principle of causality to be objectively, necessarily, eternally and universally valid.” Many Western philosophers have concurred, though not all. Today, most physicists believe that, on a quantum level at least, and perhaps at the Big Bang, there are events without apparent cause. I do not know if events without effect are postulated by anyone. In any case, we see that even on the physical level “chance” is admitted as a possibility, if not a certainty. The law of causality can continue to serve us as a working principle, pressing us to seek diligently for causes and effects, but cannot in any case be regarded as an *a priori* universal truth. Causal logic has to remain open-minded, since in any case these “laws” are mere generalizations – inductive, not deductive, truths.

Furthermore, the law of causality just mentioned is only at best a law of *causation*. Philosophers who admit of *volition*<sup>41</sup> cannot consistently uphold such a law as

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<sup>41</sup> And at least some Buddhists seem to. For instance, the statement in the *Dhammapada* (v.165) that “by oneself the

universal to all existents, but only in the ‘mechanistic’ domains of physical and psychological events. With regard to events involving the will, if we admit that a human being (or equivalent spiritual entity, a higher animal or God) can ‘will’ (somehow freely produce) a physiological event (i.e. a physical movement in his body) or a psychological event (i.e. an imagination, a mental projection), or even another soul (at least in the sense of choosing to reproduce), we have to consider this as an exception to such universal law of causation.

Also, if we consider that the Agent of will is always under the *influence* of some experience or reason, we might formulate an analogical law of causality with reference to this. But influence is not to be confused with causation; it does not determine the will, which remains free, but only strengthens or weakens it, facilitating or easing its operation in a certain direction. Moreover, it is not obvious that will cannot occur ‘nihilistically’, without any influence; it may well be free, not only to resist influences but also to operate in the absence of any motive whatsoever. In the latter case, the law of causality would again be at best a working principle, not a universal fact that volition requires a motive.

Let us now consider the more extreme statement that ‘everything causes and is caused by everything’, which could be construed (incorrectly) as implied by co-dependence. To say this is effectively to say paradoxically (as Nagarjuna would no doubt have

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evil is done, and it is oneself who suffers: by oneself evil is not done, and by one’s Self one becomes pure. The pure and the impure come from oneself: no man can purify another” – this statement seems to imply existence of a self with responsibility for its actions.

enjoyed doing!) that *nothing causes or is caused by anything* – for causality is a relation found by noticing regularities *in contrast to* irregularities. If everything were regularly co-existent with everything, we would be unable to distinguish causality in the first place. It follows that such an extreme version of the law of causality is logically untenable. Causality cannot imply that ‘everything causes everything’ or ‘everything is caused by everything’ – and to deny the latter statements does not deny the concept, note well. The concept is not derived from such a law, but independently from observation of regularities in experience; our ability to discern such regularities from the mass of experience implies that there are irregularities too; whence, such an extreme statement cannot be consistently upheld. We must thus admit that things do not have unlimited numbers of causes or effects.

Although ‘everything causes everything’ implies ‘co-dependence’, the latter does not imply the former; so our refutation of the wider statement does not disprove co-dependence, only one possible (extreme) view of it. My criticism of co-dependence would be the following. For a start, the doctrine presented, and the illustrations given in support of it, do not use the term causality with any precision. First, as we have suggested above, *causality, is a broad term, covering a variety of very distinct relations:*

- causation or ‘mechanistic’ causality within the material and mental domains, and causation itself has many subspecies;
- volition, or action by souls on the material or mental or spiritual domains, and will has many degrees of freedom; and
- influence, which refers to limitations on volition set by material or mental or spiritual entities.

The doctrine of co-dependence glosses over the profound differences between these different senses of the terms ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, using them as if they were uniform in all their applications.

Also to be included as ‘causal relations’ in a broader sense are the *negations* of these relations. Even if some philosopher doubts one, two or all three of these (positive) relations, he would have to consider them. Concepts of ‘chance’ or ‘spontaneity’ are not simple, and can only be defined by negating those of causality; likewise, the concept of ‘determinism’ requires one of ‘free will’. It is only in contrast to causality concepts, that non-causality can be clearly conceived. Furthermore, co-dependence ignores that *some* things are not (positively) causally related to each other, even if they may have (positive) causal relations to other things. *That something must have some cause or effect, does not imply that it has this or that specific thing as its cause or effect; there are still things to which it is not causally related.* If everything had the same positive causal relation to everything, and no negative causal relation, there would be no such thing as causality, nothing standing out to be conceived.

Secondly, if we consider chains (or, in discourse, syllogisms) of causal relations, we find that *the cause of a cause is not necessarily itself a cause*, or at least not in the same sense or to the same degree. For instance, with reference to causation, we can formally prove that if A is a complete cause of B and B is a complete cause of C, then A is a complete cause of C. But if A is a complete cause of B and B is a partial cause of C, it does not follow that A is at all a cause of C. Similarly, when we mix the types of causality (e.g. causation and volition in series), we find that causality is not readily transmitted, in the same way or at all. It is therefore logically incorrect to infer transmission of causality

from the mere fact of succession of causal relations as the theory of co-dependence does.

Thirdly, those who uphold co-dependence tend to *treat both directions of causal relation as equivalent*. Thus, when they say ‘everything is causally related to everything’, they seem to suggest that being a cause and being an effect is more or less the same. But something can only be regarded as a cause of things occurring after it in time or below it in conceptual hierarchy, and as an effect of things occurring before it or above it. Upstream and downstream are not equivalent. Thus, ‘interdependence’ cannot be taken too literally, using ‘causal relation’ in a too vague sense, without attention to the distinction between causal and effectual relationship.

Fourthly, the doctrine of co-dependence suggests or calls for some sort of law(s) of causality, and as already discussed higher up, no universal or restricted law of causality is logically necessitated by the concept of causality, although such a law may be considered a hypothetical principle to be validated inductively. The concept of causality only requires that *some* causality occur, without prejudicing *how much*. So, though co-dependence implies causality, causality does not imply co-dependence.

Fifthly, the concept of ‘co-dependence’ is upheld in contrast and opposition to a concept of ‘*self-subsistence*’. Something self-subsistent would exist ‘by itself’, *without need of origination or support or destructibility*, without ‘causal conditions’. Buddhism stresses that (apart perhaps from ultimate reality) nothing in the manifold has this property, which Buddhism claims ordinary consciousness upholds. In truth, the accusation that people commonly believe in the self-subsistence of entities is false – this is rather a construct of earlier Indian philosophy.

People generally believe that most things have origins (which bring them into existence), and that all things once generated have static relations to other existents (an infinity of relations, to all other things, if we count both positive and negative relations as ‘relations’), and that things usually depend for their continued existence on the presence or absence of other things (i.e. if some of the latter come or go, the former may go too). What is doubtful however, in my view, is the vague, implicit suggestion of the co-dependence doctrine, that *while* a thing is present, i.e. during the time of its actual existence, it has a somehow only relative existence, i.e. were it not for the other things present in that same moment, it could not stand.

This is not essentially a doctrine of relativity to consciousness or Subject (though Yogachara Buddhism might say so), note well, but an existential incapacity to stand alone. This is the aspect of co-dependence that the Western mind, or ordinary consciousness, would reject. In our world<sup>42</sup>, *once* a thing is, and *so long as* it is, *irrespective of* the causes of its coming to be or the eventual causes of its ceasing to be, or of other things co-existing with it in time and its relationships to those things, or of its being an object of consciousness, it simply exists. It is a done thing, unchangeable historical fact, which nothing later in time can affect. It cannot be said to ‘depend’ on anything in the sense implied by Buddhists, because *nothing could possibly be perceived or conceived as reversing or annulling this fact*.

What Buddhism seems to be denying here is that ‘facts are facts’, whatever their surrounding circumstances,

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<sup>42</sup> We can, incidentally, imagine a world where only one thing exists, without anything before it, simultaneous to it or after it.

and whether or not they are cognized, however correctly or imperfectly. It is a denial that appearances, whatever their content and whether they be real or illusory, have *occurred*. We cannot accept such deviation from the Law of Identity.

Such considerations lead me to the conclusion that ‘co-dependence’ is not easy to formulate and establish, if at all. Nevertheless, I regard it as a useful ‘way of looking at things’, a valuable rough and ready heuristic principle. Also, to be fair, I remain open to the possibility that, at some deep level of meditative insight I have not reached, it acquires more meaning and validity.

## 2. Conclusions of first phase of studies

It must be understood that this research has not been idle reshuffling of information and symbols. It had *both practical and theoretical* purposes in mind.

The practical questions relate to everyday reasoning about causes and effects. One of the principal questions we posed, you will recall, was *whether the cause of the cause of something is itself a cause of that thing or not, and if it is, to whether it is so to the same degree or a lesser degree*. This issue of causal (or effectual) chains is what the investigation of causal syllogism is all about. What our dispassionate research has shown is that it is absurd to expect ordinary reasoning, unaided by such patient formal reflections, to arrive at accurate results. The answer to the question about chains is resounding and crucial: **the cause of a cause is not necessarily itself a cause, and if it is a cause it need not be one to the same degree**. Once the scientific impact of this is understood, the importance of such research becomes evident.

But this syllogistic issue has not been the only one dealt with. We have in the process engaged in many other investigations of practical value. The definitions of the determinations causation by means of **matrixes** can help both laypeople and scientists to classify particular causative relations, simply by observing conjunctions of *presences and absences of various items*. Generalizations may occur thereafter, but they should always be checked by further empirical observation (at least, a readiness to notice; eventually, active experiment) and adjusted as new data appears (or is uncovered).

Another interesting finding has been the clarification of the relationships between positive and negative, absolute and relative causative propositions: for instance, that **we may affirm partial or contingent causation, while denying it of a particular complement**. One very important principle – that we have assumed in this volume, but not proved, because the proof is only possible in the later phase of research – is that (*absolute*) “*lone determinations*” are logically impossible. This means that we may in practice consider that **if there is causation at all, it must be in one or the other of the four “joint” determinations**.

Another finding worth highlighting is that **non-causation is denial of the four genera (or four species) of causation**, and before these can be definitely denied we have to go through a long process of empirical verification, observing presences and absences of items or their negations in all logically possible conjunctions. It is thus in practice as difficult to prove non-causation as to prove causation! Indeed, to be concluded the former requires a lot more careful analysis of data than the latter. Of course, in practice (as with all induction) we assume causation absent, except

where it is proved present. But if we want to check the matter out closely, a more sustained effort is required.

With regard to the theoretical significance of our findings, now. By theoretical, here, I mean: relevant to philosophical discussions and debates about causality. Obviously, so far we have only treated causation, and said nothing about volition and allied cause-effect relations, so we cannot talk about causality in its broadest sense.

What our perspective makes clear is that **the existence of “causation” is indubitable**, once we apprehend it as a set of experiential yes or no answers to simple questions, leaving aside references to some underlying “force” or “connection” (which might be discussed as a later explanatory hypothesis). If we look upon causation in a positivistic manner, and avoid metaphysical discussions that tend to mystify, it is a simple matter. *Causation is an abstraction, in response to phenomenologically evident data.* It is a summary of data.

It is not purely empirical, in the sense of a concept only summarizing *presences* of phenomena. It involves a rational element, in that it also summarizes *absences* of phenomena. Affirmation may only be acknowledgment of the empirically apparent. But negation, as I have stressed in my work *Phenomenology*<sup>43</sup>, is a partly rational act (a question is asked: is the thing I remember or imagine now present to my senses?), as well as a partly empirical act (the answer is no: I see or hear or otherwise sense nothing equivalent to that image!). Absence does not exist independently like presence, but

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<sup>43</sup> This final chapter of Phase One was written in 2003, after publication of *Phenomenology*.

signifies an empirically disappointed mental expectation.

Reading debates between philosophers (for example, David Hume's discussions), one might get the impression that non-causation is an obvious concept, while causation needs to be defined and justified. But, as we have seen here, *non-causation can only be understood and proven with reference to causation*. Before we can project a world without causation, we have to first understand what we mean by causation, its different determinations, their interactions, and so forth. But the moment we do that, the existence of causation is already obvious. However, this does not mean that non-causation does not exist. Quite the contrary. Since, as we have seen, some formal processes like syllogism with premises of causation are inconclusive, we may say that the existence of causation implies that of non-causation! This finding has two aspects:

- (a) The more immediate aspect is inferred from the fact that the cause of a cause of something is not necessarily itself a cause of it: **taking any two things at random, they may or not be causatively related**. This implication is valuable to contradict the Buddhist notion that “everything is caused by everything”. But the possibility of independence from *some* things does not exclude dependence on *other* things. Each of the two things taken at random may well have other causes and effects than each other.
- (b) A more radical aspect is the issue of spontaneity, or no causation *by anything at all*. We can only touch upon this issue here, since we have only dealt with causation so far. But what our formal study of causation has made clear is that we cannot say offhand whether or not spontaneity in this sense is possible. **There is no “law of causation” that**

**spontaneity is impossible**, i.e. that “everything has a cause”, as far as I can see. Nothing we have come across so far implies such a universal law; it can only be affirmed by generalization. Spontaneity (chance, the haphazard) remains conceivable.

I think the point is made: that formal research such as the present one has both practical and theoretical value. Let us now explain why the research undertaken so far is insufficient.

### 3. Conclusions of second phase of studies

The universal causation doctrine predicts that every existent has *at least some causative relation(s)* to some other existents. This is usually understood in a moderate sense as *only some other things* cause each thing, but Buddhism understands it more extremely as *all other things* cause each thing. This ‘universal universal causation’ is referred to as the **interdependence** (or codependence) of all things.

We normally suppose that only the past and present can cause the present or future; and indeed, this principle should primarily be read that way. But some might go further and claim that time is transcended by causation, and that literally everything causes everything; I am not sure Buddhism goes to that extreme. Note also that, in truth, Buddhism intends its interdependence principle restrictively, as applicable only to *dharma*s, i.e. the transient phenomena constituting the world of appearances; in the higher or deeper realm of the quiescent and undifferentiated “original ground” there is no causation.

Be it said in passing, this version of “karmic law” must be distinguished from the narrower statement, which most of us agree with, that *actions have consequences*.

The latter does not imply the former! More deeply, I think what the Buddhists really meant by their law of karma was that each human (or other living) being is somewhat locked within recurring behavior patterns, very difficult (or impossible) to get out of. This is another issue, concerning not causation but volition.

That is the sense of “the wheel”: our cultural and personal habits as well as our physical limitations, keep influencing our behavior and are reinforced by repetition. Much meditation and long-term corrective action are required to change them; they cannot be overcome by immediate measures, by a sheer act of will. We are thus burdened by a “baggage” of karma, which we carry out through our lives with usually little change; it may be lightened with sustained effort, but is more likely to be made heavier as time passes.

If we logically examine the claim that “everything causes everything”, we see that if everything is causatively connected to everything else, then nothing is without such connection to any other thing, let alone without causative connection to anything whatsoever. That is, this doctrine is effectively *a denial that relative as well as absolute non-causation ever occurs*, which no one in Western culture would admit. To evaluate it objectively, let us look back on the findings in the present volume.

First, in defense of the idea of interdependence, it should be recalled that when we discussed the significance of the “last modus” in any grand matrix (modus #16 for two items, or #256 for three, etc.), which declares any combination of the items concerned or their negations as *possible* (code 1 in every cell of the modus), we saw that there was an uncertainty as to whether this indicated causation (or more broadly, connection) or its absence. If the last modus could be shown on formal grounds to indicate causation in *all* cases, then all contingents in the

universe would have to be considered as causatively related to all others (i.e. *any two contingents taken at random* could be affirmed as causatively related, specifically in the way of the partial contingent determination, **pq**).

However, since such formal demonstration is lacking, and the idea is anyway disagreeable to common sense (at least that of non-Buddhists), we estimated that the science of Logic had to keep an open mind and grant the possibility of the alternative interpretation, namely that two items may or may not be causatively related to each other (i.e. relative non-causation is possible), and moreover that spontaneity (i.e. absolute non-causation) is at least conceivable in some cases. However, in this context, the Buddhist thesis of interdependence, remains a legitimate formal postulate. But note well, only a possible alternative hypothesis; and not a very probable one for most observers (those of us who believe in freewill, for example; as well as physicists who reify the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle).

An important formal criticism we can level against the notion of interdependence is to ask what manner or degree of causation is meant by it. The term ‘causes’ in ‘everything causes everything’ is used very vaguely. Is only causation intended, to the exclusion of volition? And if causation is intended, surely this is meant broadly to include prevention? And are the different determinations of causation admitted, i.e. strong (complete and/or necessary) as well as weak (partial and/or contingent)? The definition of causation traditionally attributed to the Buddha is:

“When this is, that is; this arising, that arises.  
When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases.”

This definition would suggest that only complete necessary causation is intended. But other discussions within Buddhism suggest that this definition is only intended as a paradigm, as the most obvious case, and partial and contingent causation is also in practice admitted, as use of the plural in the expression “causes and conditions” testifies. We may regard prevention as formally subsumed by all these concepts, by negation of an item. Some discourses also seem to accept volition, but this need not concern us here. Focusing, then, on causation in a broad sense, we may make the following criticism.

If everything is causatively related to everything else, then *the only conceivable kind of causation would be weak (both partial and contingent)*. For strong causation (complete and/or necessary) surely implies a certain exclusiveness of relationship between the items. If all items are involved to some degree in the existence of a given item, then none of those causes can be claimed to predominate. So finally, it seems to me, this Buddhist doctrine of multilateral causation requires all bilateral causative relations to be weak, and ultimately abandons strong determinations (including mixtures), and all the more so the strongest determination (which it originally rightly claimed as the definition of causation).

One way to show that the interdependence theory implies specifically a ‘universal weak link’ is as follows. If we claim interdependence to apply indiscriminately to *all* ‘things’, i.e. not only to experiential things (*dharmas*), but also to abstract things, we fall into *formal* difficulties as soon as we suppose some causative relations to be strong. For then such abstract relations (i.e. causations) also count as ‘things’, and are therefore subject to interdependence. We might thus ask how a cause can be complete or necessary when that

relationship is itself dependent on some yet other cause: we are forced to contradict our premise and conclude that the cause is not as complete or necessary as it seemed.

I suppose the proposed state of affairs (universal interdependence) is formally conceivable, although I do not see on what grounds we could possibly allow such rejection in one fell swoop of a large number of moduses (i.e. all alternative moduses concerning the strong determinations). Unless a reasonable formal or empirical ground is provided, there is no justification in such a radical measure: it would constitute prejudice. The Buddhist claim is of course based on a meditative experience; but since this is esoteric, not readily available to all observers at will, we must remain critical and view it as speculative. We cannot categorically eliminate it on firm rational grounds, but we cannot just take it on faith.

It should be realized that causation is a conceptual object, not a percept. Before we can discern a causative relation between two or more percepts (and all the more so between concepts) we have to distinguish the percepts from each other (and conceptualize them by comparison and contrast of many percepts, in the case of concepts). Also, causation refers to negation, which is a product of rational as well as empirical factors. Thus, if we approach the issue of causation with respect to the phenomenological order of things, we must recognize that it is a rather high-level *abstract*, although of basic importance in the organization of knowledge. It is not something we just directly see or otherwise sense. For this reason, we may remain skeptical that there is some flash of insight that would instantly reveal the causal relations of all things in the universe.

Thus, while the interdependence doctrine apparently does not give rise to formal inconsistency, we have good

reason to doubt it with reference to normal human knowledge development. Causation is ordinarily known only gradually, through painstaking observation and analysis of particular data, always subject to review and revision as new data makes its appearance and possible contradictions are encountered. Our minds are not omniscient or rigidly deductive, but cumulative and flexibly inductive: we proceed by trial and error, constantly adjusting our positions to match up with new input and logical insight. Therefore, we cannot rely on sweeping statements, like that about interdependence, without being very careful.

Of course, some philosophers would argue back that causation as such is a man-made illusion, since pure experience only reveals *undifferentiated presence*. Differentiation into ‘distinct’ percepts, and finding that some sought things are ‘absent’, and conceptualization on the basis of ‘similarities and differences’, are all acts of reason. Indeed, if all perceived appearances are regarded as mere wave motions in a single, otherwise uniform substrate of existence (the ‘original ground’ of Buddhists or the Unified Field of physicists), then the boundaries we think we perceive or conceive for individuated things are in fact mere fictions, and all things (including even our fantasies about causation) are ultimately One in a very real sense.

So let us keep an open mind either way, and cheerfully move on. I just want to add one more small set of reflections, which the Buddhist idea of interdependence generated in me. This idea is often justified with reference to causal chains<sup>44</sup>. I tried therefore to imagine the world as a large body of water, like Lake Geneva

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<sup>44</sup> See for instance Thich Naht Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*.

say. According to this theory, supposedly, a disturbance anywhere in the lake eventually ripples through *the whole* lake, to an ever-diminishing degree but never dampening to zero. I then translated this image into the language of causal chains, for purposes of formal evaluation.

Looking at the results of macroanalysis, one would immediately answer that the Buddhist expectation is wrong. As we have seen, a cause of a cause of something is not necessarily itself a cause of that thing; and even if it is a cause, it may be so to a lesser degree. Many first figure syllogisms yield no causative conclusion, although their premises are compatible. Some do yield a conclusion, but that conclusion is often weaker in determination than the premises. Thus, we have formal reasons to doubt the idea of interdependence, if it is taken to imply that ‘a cause of cause of something is itself in turn a cause of that thing’.

All the same, I thought, thinking of the movement of disturbances in the lake, there is some truth in the contention. I then thought that maybe we should conceive of ‘*orders of causation*’ – and postulate that even “if A causes B and B causes C, but nevertheless A does not syllogistically cause C” is true in a given case in terms of first-order causation, it can still be said that A causes C in second-order causation. And we could perhaps continue, and declare that if the latter (meaning, causes a cause of) is not applicable in a given case, we could appeal to a third order of causation, etc. We might thus, in an attempt to give credence to all theories, explain the Buddhist notion as involving a diluted sense of ‘causation’.

This idea seemed plausible for a while, until I got into microanalysis. In the latter approach, conclusions are given in terms of alternative moduses. There is no room for a fanciful, more abstract, additional order of

causation: the result would be identical, still the same number (one or more) of legitimate alternative moduses. No useful purpose would be served in inventing new (narrower or broader) sets of alternative moduses, and giving such groups new names. We could only at best regard all moduses in a grand matrix (other than the first, composed of all zeros) as indicative of some ‘causation’ (in a maximal sense), and so say that any alternative modus found at the conclusion of a syllogistic intersection is ‘*residual causation*’.

But having reached this bottom line, we see how trite the suggestion is.

#### **4. Conclusions of third phase of studies**

We should also here mention the cognitive role of alleged laws of causation. We have already briefly discussed laws relating to space and time.

In times past, it seems that some degree of sameness between cause and effect was regarded as an important law of causation. Upon reflection, the proponents of this criterion for causation probably had in mind that offspring have common features with their parents. But apparently, some people took this idea further and supposed that the substance (and eventually some other characteristics) of cause and effect must be the same. But though this criterion may be applicable to biology or other specific domains (e.g. the law of conservation of matter and energy in physics could be so construed), it is not generally regarded as universal. Formally, I see no basis for it.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> If we want to go more deeply in the history of ‘laws of causation’, we would have to mention, among others, the

The law of causation most often appealed to (at least in Western thought) is that ‘everything has a cause’. But though it is evidently true of most things that they have causes, and the belief in this law often motivates us to look for or postulate causes (i.e. even if none is apparent, we may assume one to exist), we have not in our study found any *formal* grounds to affirm such a law as universal. Admitting the fact of causation does not logically force us to admit its universality. This does not prove that it is not empirically universal; and it does not prevent us from formulating such universality as an adductive hypothesis. In any case, today, as evidenced by quantum physics and big-bang cosmogony, it seems generally assumed by scientists that this law is indeed not universal (which does not mean it is not very widely applicable).

I wonder anyway if it was ever really regarded as universal. I would say that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this law was assumed universal for physical phenomena – but not necessarily for mental phenomena; human volition

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Hindu/Buddhist law of karma, according to which one’s good and bad deeds sooner or later have desirable or undesirable consequences, respectively, on oneself. It is the popular idea that ‘what goes around must come around’. Though I would agree this is sometimes, frequently or even usually empirically true, we must admit that it does not always seem confirmed by observation – so it is at best a hopeful generalization (to a life after this one) intended to have positive moral influence. In any case, I see no formal basis for it. The same can be said concerning reward or punishment by God – though it might well be true, it is not something that can readily be proved by observation or by formal means; an act of faith is required to believe in it (I do, on that basis). In any case, the latter can hardly be called a ‘law of causation’, since the free will of God is thought to be involved in bringing about the effect.

was generally taken to be an exception to the rule, i.e. freedom of the will was acknowledged by most people. Paradoxically, in the iconoclastic 20<sup>th</sup> Century, while the said law of causation was denied universality for material things, every effort was made to affirm it as regards human beings and thus forcefully deny freedom of the will<sup>46</sup>. Intellectual fashions change, evidently. But as far as I am concerned, while I admit the possibility that this law may not-be universally true of matter, I have no doubt that it is inapplicable to the human will<sup>47</sup>. Another alleged law of causation that should be mentioned here (because of the current interest in it, in some circles) is the Buddhist notion that ‘every thing is caused by everything’. As I have shown in the present volume, this idea of universal ‘interdependence’ is

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<sup>46</sup> Actually, both these changes were (I suggest) consciously or subconsciously motivated by the same evil desire to incapacitate mankind. Their proponents effectively told people: “you cannot control matter (since it is ultimately not subject to law) and you cannot control yourself (since you have no freewill) – so give up trying”. People who believed this nonsense (including its advocates) were *influenced* by it to become weaker human beings. Virtue was derided and vice was promoted. We see the shameful results of this policy all around us today.

<sup>47</sup> I argue this issue elsewhere, in my *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts*. It should be mentioned that an analogue to the law of causation is often postulated, consciously or not, for the mind. We tend to think that every act of volition has a cause, in the sense of *being influenced or motivated*, by something or other. Though largely true, this assumption taken literally would exclude purely whimsical volitions; thus, I tend to doubt it, for reasons explained in my said book. In any case, do not confuse this ‘law of influence’ with the ‘law of causation’ here discussed. These are very distinct forms of causality, which cannot be lumped together.

logically untenable. It is *formally* nonsensical. Indeed, if you just think for a moment, you will realize (without need for complex formal analysis) that to affirm interdependence is to deny causation, or at least its knowability. Every concept relies on our ability to distinguish the presence and absence of the thing conceived; if it is everywhere the same, it cannot be discerned. I think the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna can be said to have realized that; and this would explain why he ultimately opted for a no-causation thesis. However, that does not mean that causation can logically be denied: as already explained earlier, it cannot.

Well, then. Are there any ‘laws of causation’? Of course there are, a great many! Every finding concerning the formal logic of causation in this volume is a law of causation, a proven law. For instance, the fact that not all positive causative syllogisms yield a positive conclusion of some sort is an important law of causation, teaching us that a cause of a cause of something is not necessarily itself a cause of that thing.

## 7. Understanding the self

*Drawn from Meditations (2006), chapters 8-9, 12.*

### 1. The individual self in Monism

Granting the Monist thesis [briefly described in the preceding chapters], we can understand that our respective apparent individual selves, whether they are viewed as souls (entities with a spiritual substance distinct from mind and matter) or as something altogether non-substantial (as Buddhism suggests), have a relative mode of existence in comparison to the Soul of God (in Monotheistic religions), or to the underlying Original Ground of such being or the Tao (in competing doctrines).

If our selves are relative to some absolute Self (or a “Non-self”, in Buddhism), they are *illusory*. In what sense, illusory? We might say that the illusion consists in artificially differentiating the particular out of the Universal – i.e. it consists in a para-cognitive somewhat arbitrary act of ***individuation***. Apparently, then, tiny fractions of the original Totality have given themselves the false impression of being cut off from their common Source. They (that is, we all) have lost touch with their true Identity, and become confused by their limited viewpoint into believing themselves to have a *separate identity*.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Rather than suggest like Bishop Berkeley that we are ideas in the mind of God, the viewpoint here advocated is that we are, as it were, ideas in our own minds. God invented us,

To illustrate the illusoriness of individuation, we can point to waves in a body of water. A wave is evidently one with the body of water, yet we artificially mentally outline it and conventionally distinguish it, then we give it a name “the wave” and treat it as something else than the water. *There is indeed a bump in the water; but in reality, the boundaries we assign it are arbitrary.* Similarly, goes the argument, with all things material, mental or spiritual.

The **Buddhist** thesis on this topic is generally claimed to differ somewhat, considering that all empirical appearances of selfhood are phenomenal, and nothing but phenomenal. And since phenomena are impermanent like wisps of smoke – arising (we know not whence – thus, from nowhere), abiding only temporarily, all the while changing in many ways, and finally disappearing (we know not wither – thus, to nowhere) – we may not assume any constancy behind or beneath them. Our particular self is thus empty of any substance; and similarly, there is no universal Soul.

This thesis is of course sufficiently empirical with regard to the fact of impermanence of phenomena; but (in my view) there is a conceptual loophole in it. We can point out that it rejects any idea of underlying constancy without sufficient justification (i.e. by way of a *non-sequitur*); and we can advocate instead an underlying substance (material, mental or spiritual), with equally

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yes, and allowed for our seeming individuation; but He has no illusions about our separateness. It is we, in our limited and therefore warped perspective, who misperceive ourselves as individuals.

insufficient justification, or maybe more justification (namely, that this helps explain more things).<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, we may, and I think logically must, admit that we are aware of our selves, not only through perception of outer and inner phenomena, but also through another direct kind of cognition, which we may call ‘intuition’, of *non-phenomenal* aspects. There is no reason to suppose offhand only phenomenal aspects exist and are directly cognizable. Indeed, we must admit intuition, to explain how we know what we have perceived, willed or valued *in particular cases*. Conceptual means *cannot* entirely explain such particulars; they can only yield generalities.

Thus, while understanding and respecting the Buddhist non-self doctrine, I personally prefer to believe in the spirituality of the individual self and in God. I may additionally propose the following arguments. To start with, these ideas (of soul and God) do not logically exclude, but *include* the notion of “emptiness”; i.e. it remains true that particular souls and the universal Soul *cannot* be reduced to phenomenal experiences.

Moreover, Monotheism is logically more convincing, because the Buddhist thesis takes for granted without further ado something that the God thesis makes an effort to explain. The manifest facts of consciousness, volition and valuation in us, i.e. in seemingly finite individuals, remain unexplained in Buddhism, whereas in the Monotheistic thesis the personal powers of individuals are thought to stem from the like powers of God. That is, since finite souls are (ultimately illusory) fractions of God, their powers of cognition, freewill, and valuing (though proportionately finite) derive from the

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<sup>49</sup> We shall further debate the issue of impermanence later on.

same powers (on an infinitely grander scale) in the overall Soul, i.e. God.

In truth, Buddhists could retort that though this argument *reduces* the three human powers to the corresponding (greater) powers of God, it leaves unexplained the existence of these same powers in Him. They are derivatives in humans, all right, but still primaries in God.

Yes, but a distinction remains. Monotheism views the ultimate Source as having a personality, whereas for Buddhism, the Original Ground is impersonal. For the former, there is a “Who”, while for the latter, only a “What” if anything at all. It seems improbable (to me, at least) that a person would derive from a non-person. Rather, the particular soul has to have this sense of personal identity in the way of a reflection of the universal soul’s personality.

But in truth, we can still intellectually reconcile the two doctrines, if we admit that such arguments are finally just verbal differentiations and that we should rather stress their convergences and complementarities.<sup>50</sup>

In any case, the apparent meditative success of Buddhists does not logically exclude the logical possibility that their doctrine denying soul and God may

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<sup>50</sup> Needless to say, I do not intend this statement as a blanket approval, condoning all beliefs and practices included in practice under the heading of Buddhism. I have in past works for instance voiced my reserves regarding the worship directed at statues (idolatry). Even from a Buddhist point of view, this is a weird and spiritually obstructive practice (since it involves mental projection of “selfhood” into purely physical bodies). Moreover, I do not see how this can be an improvement on the worship of God. If devotion is a good thing, surely the latter is its best expression.

well be an error of interpretation – since other religions also report meditative successes although they resorted to other interpretations. If we generously accept all or most such human claims at their face value, we logically have to conclude that *correct interpretation is not necessary for meditative success*.

This suggests that meditation is ultimately independent of doctrinal quarrels. Competing, even conflicting, doctrines may be equally helpful – depending on cultural or personal context. Therefore, meditation is ultimately a pragmatic issue; it does not need particular dogmas to yield its results. Whatever your religious preference, or lack of it, just add one ingredient – meditation; this single measure will over time naturally perform wonders anyway.

The modern **Secularist** denial of spiritual substance (a soul in humans and God) can be depicted as follows. We are in this case dealing with a materialist philosophy, which grants solid reality only to the phenomenal (and conceptual inferences from it). The material phenomenon is regarded as exclusive of any other, although if pressed secularists will acknowledge some sort of additional, mental substance, imagined as a sort of cloud of “consciousness” hovering in the heads of certain material entities (i.e. at least humans and possibly higher animals).

This substance is conceived as a sort of epiphenomenon of specific combinations of matter (namely, those making up a live human body, and in particular its neurological system). They effectively consider mind as a rarified sort of matter. The proponents of this thesis make no clear distinction between the stuff of memories, dreams and imaginings, on the one hand, and the one experiencing these inner phenomena and indeed (via the senses) outer phenomena, on the other. And therefore,

they reject all notion of an additional spiritual substance or soul as the essence of self.

This philosophy can thus be doubted on two grounds. Firstly, it fails to clearly and honestly analyze mental experience and draw the necessary conclusions from such analysis. Notably missing is the distinction between the intuited “cognizing, willing and valuing self” and his (or her) “perceived mental (and sensory) experiences”, i.e. the distinction between soul and mind within the psyche. Secondly, while secularism does tend to monism in respect of matter, it refuses a similar monist extrapolation with respect to souls, and so denies God.

Today’s Secularists of course pose as “scientists”<sup>51</sup>, and by this means give their doctrine prestige among non-philosophers and superficial philosophers. But this stance is not scientific, in the strict sense of the term. *Physical science has to date not produced a single mathematical formula showing the reducibility of life, mind, consciousness, or spirit/soul to matter.* Materialists just *presume* that such a universal reductive formula will “someday” be shown possible. Maybe so; but until that day, they cannot logically rely on their presumption as if it were established fact.

They *think* their materialism is “sure” to be eventually proved all-inclusive – but this expectation and hope of

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<sup>51</sup> Some are indeed scientists – in their specific field, such as Physics. But this does not entitle them to a free ride in the general field of Philosophy. I am thinking here of Hubert Reeves, who appears on TV claiming atheism as incontrovertible fact, as if any other view is simply unthinkable. Laypersons should not confuse his prestige and media-presence with logical confirmation of his view. The underlying fallacy is *ad hominem* argument.

theirs has for the moment, to repeat, no scientific justification whatsoever! It is just a figment of their imagination, an act of faith, a mere hypothetical postulate. Secularism is thus *just another religion*, not an exclusive inference from Science.

*“Science” is entirely defined by rigor in cognitive method, without prejudice. It demands all available data be taken into consideration by our theories, and duly explained by these theories.* Genuine philosophers are not intimidated by the intellectual thuggery of those who pretend that science is exclusively materialist.

In the case of the Materialist theory, the evident data of life, mind, consciousness and spirit or soul has hardly even been acknowledged by its advocates, let alone taken into consideration. It has simply been ignored, swept under the carpet, by them. That is not science – it is sophistry. What is speculative must be admitted to be such. And two speculations that equally fit available data are on the same footing as regards the judgment of science.

## 2. The impression of self

What do we mean by “**the self**”? This term refers primarily to **that which seems to cognize, to will and to value** at any given moment. That is, these functions seem to emanate, at any given time, from a single point or place, deep within “one’s own” bodily and mental experiences, which we each call “I” or “me” or “myself”.

The self is the one who is conscious, the one experiencing, the one sensing, the one feeling, the one imagining, the one conceiving and thinking, the one liking or desiring, wishing or hoping, the one taking action, etc.... or the one abstaining from such functions.

Thus, the self is the Subject of consciousness, the Agent<sup>52</sup> of volitional acts and the Valuator of value judgments.

It is an error of observation to claim that cognitions, volitions and valuations can occur without a ‘person’ doing the cognizing, willing or valuing. Clear and honest observation recognizes that the distinctive nature of these events is to be relative to a self.

The self is an object of direct, subjective experience, or self-intuition, not to be confused with the phenomena due to sensation of matter or to mental experience. It is not something merely conceptually inferred from such experienced phenomena, but something *non-phenomenal* that is itself experienced.

Note well: our “I” is not a single phenomenon, or an aggregate of phenomena or even a mere abstraction from phenomenal experiences; it is an ongoing non-phenomenal experience. (It may well be, however, that the self would be transparent to itself, were it not subjected to phenomenal experiences that it has to cognize and deal with, through consciousness, volition and evaluation<sup>53</sup>.)

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<sup>52</sup> Note well, the word Agent as used here simply refers to ‘the one who acts’ – the actor of action, the doer of the deed. Agency here implies volition – a machine (or any other deterministic entity) is not considered an agent of its actions, except in a metaphorical way. Moreover, the colloquial connotation of agency as ‘acting on behalf of someone else’ is *not* intended here, though such instrumentality is logically subsumed under volitional action.

<sup>53</sup> The self may, in this sense, be said to be ‘relative’ – not meaning that (once and so long as it occurs) its existence is not ‘independent’, but that *its own awareness of its own existence* is dependent on external stimuli.

The self, as here technically defined, *exists for at least a moment of time*. Logically, it does not necessarily follow from such punctual data that the selves intuited at different, even contiguous, moments of time are one and the same self. That is, the *continuity* of self is an additional, perhaps more conceptual idea – although we generally (all except Buddhists) subscribe to such subsistence.

This in turn, note well, does not logically necessarily imply eternity since the beginning or to the end of time – although again, many (but far from all) people subscribe to this additional idea. In addition to our punctual and continuous ideas of self, note also that we think of self as something *cumulative* – our past momentary selves seem to accrete over time, making us heavier with responsibilities as we grow older.

Self-consciousness, here, note well, simply means “consciousness of self” – i.e. with reference to any reflexive act of consciousness, in which the self is both the Subject and the object, which is assumably a direct and immediate cognitive (intuitive) act. Self-consciousness can also mean consciousness (i.e. intuition, here again) of any of the three functions of the self, viz. cognition, volition and valuation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The phrase “self-consciousness” is additionally sometimes used, in philosophy and science, to refer to consciousness that one is conscious of some other object – i.e. to “consciousness of consciousness”. The latter might be an instant event, made possible by the Subject’s dividing his attention, partly on some object and partly on his consciousness of that object; or it might involve a time-lag, assuming that the Subject is first conscious of some object, and a bit later retrospectively conscious of that first consciousness (either directly while it is still “echoing” in his mind, or indirectly through longer-term memory). Another,

These three functions, or ways of expression, of the self do not operate independently of each other but are interrelated in various ways. They may occur simultaneously or in complex chains. Cognition is the primary function, but may also occur after volition (e.g. acts of research) and valuation (e.g. deciding what to research). Volition usually implies prior cognition, but is sometimes “blind” (whimsical). Valuation is a particular sort of volition, since it implies choice; and it always implies cognition, if only the awareness of something to evaluate (but usually also awareness of various considerations).

The above proposed definition of the self refers to the essence of selfhood. In relation to this essential self, everything else is “the world out there”, “Object”, “other”. It is our deepest inside, deeper even than the mind and body. Aspects of mind and body are also often colloquially called self, but this is a misnomer. Self, as here understood, may therefore be equated to what we commonly call the “**soul**”, without prejudicing the issue as to what such assumed entity might be construed as.

One widespread theory is that the soul is composed of some non-material, call it ‘spiritual’, substance. This might be hypothesized as having spatial as well as temporal location and extension, or as somehow located and extended in time but not in space<sup>55</sup>. Another

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more colloquial and pejorative, sense of the term “self-consciousness” refers to the awareness we may have of some other person (or persons) observing us, which causes us to behave in a more awkward manner, i.e. without our customary spontaneity or naturalness, because we use our will to make sure the observer gets a certain “favorable” (in whatever sense) image of us.

<sup>55</sup> Or again, we might like the poet Khalil Gibran consider the soul as “a sea boundless and measureless.”

possible way to view it is as a special sort of ‘knot’ in the fabric of space-time, a knot with different properties than those of so-called material entities. Some philosophers (notably, Buddhist and Materialist ones) altogether deny the soul’s existence<sup>56</sup>.

Whatever the theoretical differences between competing traditions, concerning the existence and nature of the self, they generally agree on the value and need in practice – i.e. during meditation – to forget, if not actually erase, oneself. This is of course no easy task. Certainly, at the earlier stages of meditation, when we are appalled to discover the mental storms in a teacup our ego concerns constantly produce, it seems like a mission impossible. But there are ways and means to gradually facilitate the required result.

At the deepest level, one has to eventually *give up on the Subject-Object or self-other division*. If Monism is considered as the ultimate philosophical truth, then there must indeed be a plane of reality where this duality noticeably dissolves. On a practical level, one undoubtedly cannot logically expect to reach the experience of oneness, until one has managed to surrender attachment to the common impression of duality between self and other, or Subject and Object.

Such surrender is not a psychological impossibility or an artificial mental acrobatic. This is made clear, if we reflect on the fact that the Subject-Object or self-other division constitutes *ratiocination*, i.e. a rational act<sup>57</sup>.

Just as our ‘reason’ divides outer experiences into different sense-modalities, or each modality into different qualities and measures (e.g. in the visual field:

<sup>56</sup> But in my opinion, they fail to adequately explain the peculiarities of cognition, volition and valuation.

<sup>57</sup> See my *Ruminations*, chapter 9.

colors and intensities, shapes and sizes); or again, just as it makes a distinction between outer and inner experiences (e.g. between physical sights and mental visions) – so, our rational faculty is responsible for the self-other impression. This does not have to be taken to mean that our reason is inventing a false division, producing an illusion; yet, it does mean that without the regard of a rational Subject, such distinction would never arise in the universe.

These insights imply that there is *no need* to epistemologically invalidate the Subject-Object distinction<sup>58</sup> to realize that we can still eventually (if only in the course of meditation) hope to be able to free ourselves in practice from this automatic reaction. We wish to at some stage give up the distinction, not because it is intrinsically wrong or bad, but because we wish to get beyond it, into the mental rest or peace of non-discriminative consciousness.

Sitting in meditation, one's "self" usually seems to be an ever present and weighty experience, distinct from relatively external mental and material experiences. But if one realizes that such self-experience is a rational (i.e. ratiocinative) product, a mental subdivision of the natural unity of all experience at any given moment, one can indeed shake off – or more precisely just drop – this

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<sup>58</sup> The Buddhists regard it invalid – but I would minimally argue that it has some credibility, like any appearance has until it is found to lead to antinomy. Indeed, I would go further and argue that any attempt at such invalidation is unjustifiable, and even logically impossible.

sense of self, and *experience all one's experience as a unity.*<sup>59</sup>

Note well, the task at hand is not to *ex post facto* deconstruct the rational act of division, or reconstruct the lost unity of self and other by somehow mentally sticking or merging them together, or pretend that the Subject or the Object does not really exist. Rather, the meditator has to place his soul in the pre-ratiocinative position, where the cutting-up of experience has *not yet* occurred. It is not a place of counter-comments, but a place of no (verbal or non-verbal) comment. It is the position of pristine experience, where the mental reflex of sorting data out has not yet even begun.

All things are accepted as they appear. An impression of self appears, as against an impression of other? So well and good – it need not be emphasized or noted in any way. It is just experienced. If no distinctions are made, there are no distinctions. We remain observant, that's all. We enjoy the scenery. Our awareness is phenomenological.

In pure experience, what we call “multiplicity” may well be manifest, but it is all part and parcel of the essential “unity”. Here, essence and manifestation are one and the same. Here, Subject and Object form a natural continuum. The totality is in harmony, bubbling with life. It is what it is, whatever it happens to be.

Before getting to this stage of integral experience, one may of course have to “work on oneself” long and hard.

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<sup>59</sup> This would of course be one aspect of overall “integration” (what is called *Samadhi* in Sanskrit, *Wu* in Chinese, *Satori* in Japanese).

### 3. Distinguishing the ego

The self was above defined – from a philosophical perspective – as *the apparent Subject of cognition and Agent of volition and valuation*. But – in common parlance – most people identify themselves with much more than this minimal definition. To clarify things, it is therefore useful to distinguish two meanings of the term.

In its purest sense, the term self refers to what is usually called the soul or person. In a colloquial sense, the term is broader, including what intellectuals refer to as “the **ego**”. The latter term – again from a philosopher’s point of view – refers to the material and mental phenomena, which indeed seem rightly *associated with* our self, but which we wrongly tend to *identify with* it. Thus, by the term ego we shall mean all aspects of one’s larger self *other than* one’s soul; i.e. all extraneous aspects of experience, commonly misclassified as part of oneself.

This is just a way to recognize and emphasize that we commonly make errors of identification as to what constitutes the self<sup>60</sup>. If we try to develop a coherent

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<sup>60</sup> The word ‘ego’ originally, in Latin, meant ‘I’. Nowadays, in English, it is commonly understood in the pejorative sense used by me in the present essay. I do not subscribe to the sense used in psychoanalytic theory, which presents the ego as a segment of the psyche “mediating between the person and reality”. Such a notion is to me conceptually incoherent, since it ascribes a separate personality (i.e. selfhood) to this alleged segment, since to “mediate” anything implies having cognitive, volitional and evaluative powers. The ego of psychoanalysts involves a circularity, since it raises the question: who or what is mediating between the person and reality, and on what basis? The common sense of ‘ego’ is, I would say, closer semantically to the ‘id’ of psychoanalysis.

philosophical system, looking at the issues with a phenomenological eye, we must admit the self in the sense of soul (i.e. Subject/Agent) as the core sense of the term. The latter is a non-phenomenal entity, quite distinct from any of the material and mental phenomena people commonly regard as themselves.

We tend to regard our body, including its sensory and motor faculties, as our self, or at least as part of it. But many parts of our body can be incapacitated or detached, and we still remain present. And, conversely, our nervous system may be alive and well, but we are absent from it. So, it is inaccurate to identify our self with our body.

Nevertheless, we are justified in associating our self with our body, because we evidently have a special relationship to it: we have more input from it and more power over it than we do in relation to any other body. Our life takes shape within the context of this body. For this reason, we call it ‘our’ body, implying possession or delimitation.

With regard to the mind, a similar analysis leads to the same conclusion. By ‘mind’, note well, I mean only the apparent mental *phenomena* of memory and imagination (reshufflings of memories), which seem to resemble and emerge from the material phenomena apparently experienced through the body (including the body itself, of course). Mind is not a Subject, but a mere (non-physical) Object; a mind has no consciousness of its own, only a Subject has consciousness.

This limited sense of mind is not to be confused with a larger sense commonly intended by the term, which would include what we have here called soul. I consider this clarification of the word mind very important, because philosophies “of mind” in which this term is

loosely and ambiguously used are bound to be incoherent<sup>61</sup>.

The term I use for the conjunction of soul and mind is ‘psyche’. Of course, below the psyche, at an unconscious level, lies the brain or central nervous system, which plays a strong role in the production of mental events, although it is not classed as part of the psyche but as *part of the body*. Some of the items we refer to as ‘mind’ should properly be called brain.

The term “unconscious mind”, note well, refers to *potential* (but not currently actual) *items of consciousness stored in the brain* (and possibly the wider nervous system); for example, potential memories. Such items are called mind, only insofar as they might eventually appear as mental objects of consciousness; but strictly speaking, they ought not be called mind. The term “unconscious mind” is moreover an imprecision of language in that the mind is never conscious of anything – it is we, the Subjects, who are conscious of mental items (mental equivalents of sensory phenomena, as well as ideas and emotions).

Thus, mind refers to a collection of evanescent phenomena, without direct connection between them, which succeed each other in our ‘mind’s eye’ (and/or ‘mind’s ear’) but which lack mental continuity, their only continuity being presumably their emergence from the same underlying material brain. The mind cannot be identified with the self, simply because mental events are experienced as mere objects of consciousness and

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<sup>61</sup> Equivocal use of the term mind leads some philosophers into syllogistic reasoning involving the Fallacy of Four Terms, in which the middle term has different senses in the major and minor premises, so that the conclusion is invalid.

will, and not as the Subject and Agent of such psychical events. Moreover, the mind may momentarily stop displaying sights or sounds without our sense of self disappearing.

Nevertheless, our mind is ours alone. Only we directly experience what goes on in it and only we have direct power over its fantasies. Even if someday scientists manage to look into other people's private minds and find ways to affect their contents, one person remains in a privileged relationship to each mind. It is therefore proper to call our minds 'ours', just as we call our bodies 'ours'.

Thus, the self, in the colloquial sense, is a collection of three things: soul, mind and body – i.e. spiritual, mental and material experiences. But upon reflection, only the soul counts as self proper – the ego, comprising mind and body, is indeed during our whole lifetime "associated with" our strict self (that is, soul), but it should not be "identified with" that self. The ego is merely an appendage to the self or soul, something 'accidental' (or at best 'incidental') to it.

However, this should not be taken to mean that the soul has no share in the ego. Many of the physical and mental traits that comprise the ego are at least in part due to past choices and actions of the soul. The soul is thus somewhat responsible for much of the ego; the latter is in effect a cumulative expression of the former. Some people have big, mean egos, to their discredit; others have smaller, nicer egos, to their credit. Moreover, the soul tends to function in the context of the ego or what it perceives as the ego.

In narrower psychological terms, the ego is a particular self-image one finds motives for constructing and clinging onto. It is a mental construct composed of images selectively drawn from one's body and mind – some based on fact, some imaginary. Compared to the

real state of affairs, this self-image might be inflationary (flattering, pretentious) or it might be depreciative (undemanding, self-pitying). Ideally, of course, one's self-image ought to be realistic; i.e. one must at all times strive to be lucid.

## 8. Meditating on self

*Drawn from Meditations (2006), chapters 13, 31-32.*

### 1. Dismissing the ego

On a practical level, such insights mean that what we regard as our “personal identity” has to be by and by clarified. We gradually, especially with the help of meditation, realize the disproportionate attention our material and mental experiences receive, and the manipulations we subject them to.

Because of the multiplicity and intensity of our sensory and mental impressions, we all from our birth onwards confuse ourselves with the phenomena impinging upon us. Because they shout so loudly, dance about us so flashily, weigh upon us so heavily, we think our experiences of body and mind are all there is, and we identify with them. To complicate matters further, such self-identification is selective and often self-delusive.

It takes an effort to step back, and realize that body and mind phenomena are just fleeting appearances, and that our self is not the phenomena but the one experiencing them. Even though this self is non-phenomenal (call it a soul, or what you will), it must be put back in the equation. *We may associate ourselves with our bodily and mental phenomena, but we must not identify with them.* There is no denying our identity happens to currently be intimately tied up with a certain body, mind, social milieu, etc. – but this does not make these things one and the same with us.

Gradually, it becomes clear that our personal confusion with these relatively external factors of our existence is

a cause of many of the difficulties in our relation to life. We become attached to our corporeality or psychology, or to vain issues of social position, and become ignorant as to who (and more deeply, Who) we really are.

To combat such harmful illusions, and see things as they really are, one has to “work on oneself”. One must try and diminish the influence of the ego.

Specifically, one has to overcome the tendencies of egotism and egoism. Egotism refers to the esthetic side of the ego, i.e. to our narcissistic concerns with appearance and position, our yearning for admiration and superiority and our fear of contempt and inferiority. Egoism refers to the ethical side of the ego, i.e. to our material and intellectual acquisitiveness and protectionism.

The issue is one of degree. A minimum of self-love and selfishness may be biologically necessary and normal, but an excess of those traits is certainly quite poisonous to one's self and to others. Much daily suffering ensues from unchecked ego concerns. Egotism produces constant vexation and resentment, while egoism leads to all sorts of anxieties and sorrows.

On this point, all traditions agree: no great spiritual attainment is possible without conquest of egocentricity. Self-esteem and self-confidence are valuable traits, but one must replace conceit with modesty and arrogance with humility. Meditation can help us tremendously in this daunting task.

Of course, *it is none other than the self (i.e. soul) who is egocentric!* The ego is not some other entity in competition with the soul in a divided self, a “bad guy” to pour blame on. We have no one to blame for our psychological failings other than our soul, whose will is essentially free. ***The ego has no consciousness or will of its own: it has no selfhood.***

The ego indeed *seems to* be a competing self, because – and only so long as and to the extent that – we (our self or soul) identify with it. It is like an inanimate mask, which is given an illusion of life when we confuse our real face with it. But we should not be deluded: it is we who are alive, not the mask.

Rather, the body and mind (i.e. the factors making up the ego) are mechanistic domains that strongly *influence* the soul in sometimes negative ways. They produce natural inclinations like hunger for food or the sex drive or yearning for social affiliation, which are sometimes contrary to the higher interests of the soul. For this reason, we commonly regard our spiritual life as a struggle against our ego inclinations.

Not all ego inclinations are natural. Many of the things we think we need are in fact quite easy to do without. As we commonly say: “It’s all in the mind”. In today’s world, we might often add: “It is just media hype” for ultimately commercial or political purposes. People make mountains out of molehills. For example, some think they cannot make it through the day without a smoke or a drink, when in fact it is not only easy to do without such drugs but one feels much better without them.

Often, natural inclinations are used as pretexts for unnatural inclinations. For example, if one distinguishes between natural sensations of hunger in the belly and the mental desire to titillate one’s taste buds, one can considerably reduce one’s intake of calories and avoid getting painfully fat. Similarly, the natural desire for sex for reproductive purposes and as an expression of love should not be confused with the physical lusts encouraged by the porno industry, which have devastating spiritual consequences.

Thus, the struggle against ego inclinations ought not be presented as a struggle against nature – it is rather

mostly a fight against illusions of value, against foolishness. It is especially unnatural tendencies people adopt or are made to adopt that present a problem. It is this artificial aspect of ego that is most problematic. And the first victory in this battle is the realization: “this is not me or mine”.

Once one ceases to confuse oneself with the ego, once one ceases to regard its harmful inclinations as one’s own, it becomes much easier to neutralize it. There is hardly any need to “fight” negative influences – one can simply ignore them as disturbances powerless to affect one’s chosen course of action. The ego need not be suppressed – it is simply seen as irrelevant. It is defeated by the mere disclosure of its essential feebleness.

Meditation teaches this powerful attitude of *equanimity*. One sits (and eventually goes through life) watching disturbances come and go, unperturbed, free of all their push and pull. The soul remains detached, comfortable in its nobility, finding no value in impure forces and therefore thoroughly uninfluenced by them.

This should not, of course, be another “ego trip”. It is not a role one is to play, self-deceitfully feeding one’s vanity. On the contrary, one experiences such meditation as “self-effacement” or “self-abnegation”, as if one has become transparent to the disturbances, as if one is no longer there to be affected by them.

This is, more precisely put, ego-dismissal, since one has ceased to identify with the forces inherent in the ego. Such dismissal should not, of course, be confused with evasion. It is abandonment of the foolish psychological antics – but this implies being very watchful, so as to detect and observe them when they occur.

There is no need for difficult ascetic practices. One has to just become more aware and sincerely committed; then one can nimbly dodge or gently deflect negative

tendencies that may appear. Being profoundly at peace, one is not impressed by them and has no personal interest in them.

Many people devote much time and effort to helping other people out materially or educationally. This is rightly considered as an efficient way to combat self-centeredness, although one should always remain alert to the opportunities for hidden egotism and egoism such pursuits offer.

Granting Monism as the true philosophy, it would seem logical to advocate ‘altruism’ as the ultimate ethical behavior. However, this moral standard is often misunderstood to mean looking out for the interests of others while ignoring one’s own interests. Such a position would be simplistic if not dishonest. If we are all one, the all-one includes and does not exclude oneself.

Thus, I would say that whilst altruistic behavior is highly commendable and admirable, working on oneself first and foremost would seem a very necessary adjunct and precondition. Conceivably, when one reaches full realization, one can pretty well forget oneself altogether and devote oneself entirely to others – but until then one must pay some attention to one’s legitimate needs, if only because one is best placed to do so.

## 2. With or without a self

An experience I once had: as I came out of a meditation, I felt my mind tangibly slipping back into its habitual identity, as one might sink into a comfortable, familiar old couch. This insight suggests to me that our ego-identity is a sort of ‘mental habitat’, a set of mental parameters that we attach to because we have become used to doing so. But meditation teaches us that this

tendency is not inevitable – we can get off the couch, and if we must sit somewhere sit elsewhere.

What is called ‘fear of enlightenment’ may simply be the centripetal force that pulls us back into our habitual identity. The individual self feels secure in the ego-shell it has manufactured for its own protection; it restrains consciousness from leaving its usual limited view on things and flying up high into the universal perspective. Without this tendency of resistance to change, we fear our “I” might suddenly dissolve and leave us defenseless.

One should avoid basing one’s meditation on a metaphysical or other ideological prejudice. Meditation ought to be a process of free discovery, rather than of imposing some preconceived notion on oneself. The way I figure it is: if there is some important basic truth out there, then it will make its appearance to me too eventually. This is not an attitude of lack of humility or faith, but one of respect for the efficacy and universality of meditation.

This is the attitude I adopt towards the Buddhist doctrine of “no self” (*anatman*). If the Buddha discovered through deep meditation that there is no soul, then everyone else ought to in time be also able to (if they proceed with similar enthusiasm). From a merely discursive, philosophical point of view, I am personally (as already explained above and in previous writings) not convinced of this notion.

However, this resistance to arguments that do not strike me as entirely logical does not prevent me from agreeing that it is sometimes appropriate in meditation *to behave as if one has no self*. Though I believe that it is the self that so behaves, I do believe it is possible to behave in a quasi-selfless manner. Thus, the Buddhist doctrine that there is ultimately nothing behind our impression of having a self, other than passing clouds of phenomena,

can be used for practical guidance without having to be accepted as a theoretical dogma.

For selflessness, in the sense intended here, is indeed meditatively, psychologically and morally valuable, if not essential. To be cognitively truly “in the present tense”, you must get to ignore all the memories and anticipations that make up your phenomenal identity or ego. Indeed, even your underlying soul, that in you which cognizes, wills and values, has to abstain from making its intuited presence felt. By becoming *de facto, if not de jure, absent*, you make way for pure experience.

In meditation, then, we do hope for apparent if not real self-effacement. We try to get past the cognitively imposing impression of self, and attain some transparency of being. Our ego (the superficial self), which is an aggregate of phenomena, including all our modalities of perception, bodily sensations, emotions, fantasies, our life's motives, the people we think about, and so forth – should fade away in the course of meditation. Likewise, our soul (the deeper self), comprising our being conscious, our willing and our valuing, apperceived by intimate intuitions, should eventually disappear.

Such disappearance need not be taken to mean that the soul is really nullified. It may be (in) there, yet cease to appear. The Subject of awareness is in fact present, but its awareness is not turned upon itself (as is its wont to do). There is a surrender of subjectivity, in favor of objectivity; a self-abnegation of sorts occurs. You cease to be a person in your own mind, and focus on whatever else happens to be present.

In this state of absorption<sup>62</sup>, you have no name, no accumulation of character traits, no past, no future, no history, no family, no record, no intentions, nothing to think of or to do, no loves and hates, no desires and fears, no virtues and vices. Moreover, you forget your cognitive presence, your will to be there, your value judgments – and you just are. This state of self-forgetfulness makes possible a more universal consciousness, because self-consciousness tends to limit our vision.

It may well be (allow me to suggest it, as at least conceivable) that the Buddhist dogma of “no self” is a deliberate doctrinal lie, by the religion’s founder or later authorities in it, with the best of intentions – made on the premise that, even if this doctrine is logically untenable, it is *useful* to meditation, because *the belief in it facilitates* self-effacement. The intent in proposing this doctrine was not to express some theoretical truth, but rather to generate a *practical* consequence in a maximum of people. The intent was to get a job done – viz. to help people get to realization.

If believing there is no self more readily advances to consciousness without self-consciousness, and thence to universal consciousness, then teachers may do people a favor by telling them there is no self. But teachers could also admit to people that there is a self, or even just that there *might be* a self, but tell them they should *act as if* there is none. Even if the former method is perhaps more efficient, the latter method may still be effective. The ultimate result may be the same, although in one case we are treated as children and in the other as adults.

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<sup>62</sup> Presuming it is in fact possible – I cannot confirm it firsthand.

There is no doubt that – not only in sitting meditation, but also in moving meditations, and indeed in everyday life – self-awareness of the wrong sort can interfere with the clarity of one's consciousness and the smoothness of one's actions. Granting the self is a hurdle to ultimate insight, it has to one way or the other be annulled. A simple solution to this problem is to deny the self's existence. Another, if more demanding, approach is to recommend *pretending* there is no self.

Thus, even if we do not entirely accept in the Buddhist idea of emptiness (non-essence or non-identity), we might yet reap its benefits and manage anyway to render our self inconspicuous and unobtrusive. The alternative method here proposed seems logically legitimate, because it acknowledges that the seeker cannot really know in advance whether or not there is a self, except by hearsay evidence (the reports of allegedly realized predecessors).

The *anatman* doctrine is far from convincing on a deductive level; therefore, it can only be proved inductively, by personal observation, if at all. The issue of self versus selflessness is a hurdle, but it must not be made out to be an impasse. If realization is indeed a human potential, then this hurdle can be passed over without resorting to dogma. So, if belief in selflessness helps, quasi-belief in it is ultimately just as good.

Concerning the above comments on the issue of self, the following objection may be raised. What about the more Hindu and Jewish doctrine of universal consciousness, viz. that it is consciousness of the grand Self behind all individuated selves, i.e. consciousness (to the extent possible) of God? How can that metaphysical interpretation be rendered compatible with the Buddhist recommendation (based on denial of whatever substance to any self) to forget the self?

We can argue that even if ultimate realization is consciousness of God (the reality of Self behind all illusory little selves), it can still be considered necessary to overcome one's habitual, insistent focus on "I, me and mine". And indeed, if we look at the moral injunctions of Judaism – and the Christian, Islamic and Hindu religions – the emphasis on modesty, humility and altruism is evident everywhere. It means: get past egotism, egoism and selfishness, and see things more broadly and generously.

If we reflect on this, it is obvious that no consciousness of God, to whatever degree, is possible without surrender of all conceit, pride and arrogance. No one dare face his or her Creator and Judge as an equal. One has to have an attitude of deep reverence and total submission; any disrespect or defiance would be disastrous. Even in a Zen approach, the attitude is one of utter simplicity, lack of pretentiousness. "You'll never get to heaven" while flaunting your ego as usual.

### **3. Whether mind or matter**

Note that similar arguments to the above can be used in other metaphysical fields. For example, the Yogacara school's "mind only" doctrine (Mentalism) may be found useful to the meditator, to help him distance himself from apparent matter and material concerns. But such utility need not depend on the literal truth of the doctrine; it may suffice to regard it as just a tool. In spiritual pursuits, one has to be pragmatic, and not get bogged down in disputes.

It may be enough to think and act as if matter does not exist, for the same meditative benefits to ensue. Even if one considers the existence of matter as the most inductively justified hypothesis, the one most successful in explaining all available data – one retains the mental

power to put those theoretical convictions aside during meditation, and flexibly attune one's mind to the outlook intended by the Yogacara doctrine, so as to attain more important insights.

The doctrine that our experience even while awake is “but a dream, an illusion” can be rephrased, in modern (computer age) terms, as: all that appears before us is “just virtual world”. We can equate phenomenal appearances to a sort of massive hologram, a 3D movie “empty of substance” – yet which produces in us the same emotions, desires and reactions of all kinds, as a “real world” would.

The equivalence between the illusory and the real is at least conceivable in relation to the modalities of sight and sound, for it is introspectively evident that we can dream up sights and sounds as clear as those we apparently sense.

But in the case of touch (and smell and taste) sensations, I am not so sure we *can* perfectly reproduce them mentally, even in the sharpest dreams. However, I am not sure we *cannot* do so, either. There is (to my mind, at least) an uncertainty in this regard, because it is hard to tell for sure whether the tactile (or odorous or gustatory) phenomena that we experience in dreams (or in awake memory or imagination) are truly mental (memory recall) – or simply physical (present sensations) events that we interpret (intentionally or verbally) in certain ways.

For example, if I kiss a girl in my dreams – am I producing in my mind a phenomenon comparable to the sensation of her lips on mine, or am I simply *reading* the sensations currently felt on my (lonely) lips as equivalent to the touch of a girl’s lips? These are two very different scenarios. For, if I can imagine touch (as I imagine sights or sounds), then the phenomenological difference between mind and matter is blurred. But if

touch (etc.) is not mentally reproducible, then careful observation should allow us to tell the difference between dream and awake reality.

Thus, we ought to distinguish two types of memory – the power of recall and that of mere recognition. In recall, the original impression (seemingly due to physical sensation) can sometimes, voluntarily or involuntarily, be fully reproduced in a relatively virtual domain (i.e. the apparent mind). In mere recognition, the power of reenacting the original impression is absent, but if a similar impression does arise, one has sufficient memory of the original (somehow) to be able to relate the later impression to the earlier and declare them similar<sup>63</sup>.

But even while using such distinctions to discriminate between apparent matter and apparent mind phenomena, they do not provide us with the means to judge between Mentalism and Materialism. Because the mind-only advocates can easily argue that these are apparent distinctions within the realm of mind; that is, recall and recognition may be two categories of event within the framework of Mentalism. They could equally well be viewed as categories within a Materialist framework. Therefore, we have no *phenomenological* means to decide between the two theories.

This being the case, the mind versus matter issue (so dear to metaphysicians) is quite irrelevant to the meditator. Whether it turns out metaphysically that mind is matter or that matter is mind, or that there is a radical chasm between them, does not make any difference to the meditator. Meditation is a phenomenologically inclined discipline. Whether an

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<sup>63</sup> That is, we “sense” a vague familiarity, but we cannot clearly establish it.

object is yellow or red is of no great import to the meditator; all he cares to know is what it appears to be. Similarly, the metaphysical difference between mind and matter is of no great significance to him.

What seems evident phenomenologically is that mind and matter are not totally unconnected realms of appearance.

(a) They contain comparable phenomena (i.e. sights and sounds within them seem to resemble each other).

(b) Their “spaces” to some extent overlap (note the fact of hallucination, i.e. projection of mental images outside the head – as e.g. when one takes one’s glasses off and they still seem to be on).

(c) Also, mind and matter seem to have causal connections – in that our memories (and thence imaginations) seem to be caused by our material perceptions; and in that we produce changes in the material domain after having mentally imagined such changes (e.g. in technological invention).

(d) Even if we wished to claim mind and matter to be radically different substances, we would have to admit they have in common the fact, or stuff, of existence. Similarly, the subsumption of mind under matter or matter under mind seems ultimately irrelevant. In the last analysis, it is a merely verbal issue. Whether the answer is this or that, no change occurs in the facts faced.

Meditation is not a search for the answer to the question about the ultimate substance(s) of existents<sup>64</sup>. All the

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<sup>64</sup> So far as I can tell. Some Buddhists, particularly those of the Zen persuasion, have had the same indifference to the issue. However, some Buddhist philosophers have

same, this statement should not be taken to exclude the possibility that a fully realized person might experience something concerning the mind-matter issue, and might wish to comment on it.

Rather than linger on such philosophical conundrums during meditation, we should rather always infinitely marvel at the mystery of the facts of consciousness and will. How is it that existents “appear” to other existents? One part of the world seems to “know” another part of it, or even itself! Whether such appearance is momentary or goes on for a lifetime of years or eternally – it is a truly wondrous event! Similarly, how amazing it is that some entities in nature can apparently to some extent “affect” themselves or other entities in nature, by way of causation or (even more amazing) by way of volition!

Such questions are not asked idly or with hope of philosophical answers, in the present context, but to remind oneself of and remain alert to the miracle of consciousness and will. One should not take such powers for granted, but be aware of one’s awareness and one’s choice of awareness. At least, do so to some extent, but not to a degree that turns your meditation into a pursuit. Irrespective of any passing contents of consciousness, and of what stuff consciousness is ‘made of’, the fact of consciousness remains extremely interesting<sup>65</sup>.

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debated it for centuries. It is surprising. Perhaps these monks were curious or looking for entertainment.

<sup>65</sup> Some have called this the “field of mind”; but, though the term “mind” here conforms to frequent colloquial use, I would avoid this expression, and prefer the broader term “field of consciousness”, reserving the term mind-field to the

“Mind-only” philosophers (and this category includes not only Yogacara Buddhists, but in the West the likes of Hume and Berkeley) have proposed that we only perceive mental phenomena, by arguing that all so-called material phenomena have to be processed through local sense organs, sensations and brain, before the perceiver can access them.

That doctrine is wobbly, in part because it starts by assuming the validity of our scientific perceptions of the sensory organs and processes, and ends up by denying the reality of the very empirical data it is built on. That is, its proponents fail to reflexively ponder on their own information sources.

However, our first objection is not the main logical argument against it. The main reason that doctrine does not stand firm is another epistemological error. The Mentalists make the same mistake as do the Materialists – which is the common error of Naïve Realism. They each assume their doctrine is the only conclusion that can be drawn from the data at hand. But, as evident from the fact that both schools appeal to the same empirical data – that data can be interpreted either way.

It is not through a deduction that the issue can be resolved, but only through an open-ended induction. The only way to decide is by considering both these theories as scientific hypotheses, to be evaluated with reference to the totality of ongoing empirical findings. That is to say, only through a systematic, holistic, gradual approach, which we might refer to neutrally as Subtle Realism. This, of course, is the Phenomenological approach.

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putative substratum of mental phenomena, i.e. to a specific category of contents of consciousness.

In phenomenology, the emphasis is on *appearances as such*, without immediate concern as to their ultimate status as realities or illusions, or as mental or material, or with any other such fundamental characterizations of data. Phenomena *qua* phenomena – and likewise intuitions *qua* intuitions – are always true. Taken “for itself”, every appearance *is* just what it *seems* to be.

The issue of falsehood (as against truth) only arises when appearances are no longer regarded *at face value*, and we use some of them *to signify* some other(s), so that we have to try to judge their truth value relative to each other. For this reason, phenomenology provides us with the most conceivably solid foundation to any philosophy or science.

## 9. Impermanence

*Drawn from Meditations (2006), chapters 10-11, 14.*

### 1. Impermanence: concept and principle

Buddhist meditators attach great importance to the principle of impermanence. They consider that if one realizes that “everything is impermanent”, one is well on the way to or has already reached Realization.

However, the principle proposed by Buddhism should (in my view) be approached more critically than its proponents have hitherto done. They have taken for granted that such a principle is immediately knowable, in the way of a direct experience, and have not given enough attention to the *epistemological issues* this notion raises.

To be sure, we can and do commonly have direct experience of *some* impermanence: that of present changes. Whereas we might rationally analyze change in general (when it occurs) as an *instant* replacement of one thing by its negation, many phenomena of change evidently occur in a present *moment* (an extended amount of time). If, for example, you watch a dog running, you are not personally experiencing this sight as a series of successive stills of the dog in different positions, but as one continuous series of moves.

A good meditation on such evident impermanence is meditation on water<sup>66</sup>. One sits or stands calmly in front

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<sup>66</sup> The Greek philosopher Heraclites must have practiced this meditation, when he reportedly wrote “you

of a body of water (the sea, a river, a lake, a puddle), watching the movements on its surface – reflections on it, waves or wavelets, currents, droplets of rain, listening to the sounds. I find this practice both soothing and a great source of understanding about life.

But we must keep in mind that the concept of impermanence covers a wider range of experiences than that: it includes changes not sensible in a present moment, but only inferred over time by comparing situations experienced in distinct moments, whether contiguous or non-contiguous. Such inferences imply a reliance on memory, or an interpretation of other present traces of past events. Still other changes are known even more indirectly, through predominantly conceptual means.

Generally speaking (i.e. including all sorts of experience under one heading): we first experience undifferentiated totality, and then (pretty much automatically) subdivide it by means of mental projections and then conceptually regroup these subdivisions by comparing and contrasting them together. Buddhist philosophy admits and advocates this analysis: the subdivision and conceptualization of the phenomenological given is, we all agree, ratiocination (i.e. rational activity); it is reason (i.e. the rational faculty) that mentally “makes” many out of the One.

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cannot step into the same river twice”. This meditation is commonly practiced, even unwittingly. Other similarly natural meditations consist in watching rain falling, wind blowing through trees, clouds shifting in the sky, candlelight flickering, or the sparks and flames of a camp or chimney fire. “Watching” of course here means, not just being aware of sights (shapes and colors), but also awareness of sounds, touch-sensations, temperatures, textures, etc.

It follows from this insight (we may now argue) that *impermanence cannot be considered as a primary given*, but must be viewed as derived from the imagined subdivision and conceptual regrouping of the initially experienced whole. Even to mentally isolate and classify some directly experienced particular change as “a change” is ratiocination. All the more so, the “impermanence” of each totality of experience, moment after moment, is an idea, obtained by distinguishing successive moments of experience; i.e. by relying on memory, and comparing and contrasting the experience apparently remembered to the experience currently experienced.

The latter act, note well, requires we cut up “present experience” into two portions, one a “memory” (inner) appearance and the other a more “currently in process” (inner and/or outer) appearance. This is rational activity; so, “impermanence” is in fact never directly experienced (contrary to Buddhist claims). Unity phenomenologically precedes Diversity; therefore, the experience of diversity cannot logically be considered as disqualifying the belief in underlying unity.

This argument is not a proof of substance, but at least serves to neutralize the Buddhist denial of substance. It opens the door to an advocacy of substance<sup>67</sup> by adductive means, i.e. in the way of a legitimate hypothesis to be confirmed by overall consideration of

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<sup>67</sup> Note well that an issue within the thesis of substance is whether we advocate a single, undifferentiated substance, or a multiplicity of distinct substances. To admit of substance is not necessarily to uphold the latter, pluralist view. In Physics, the unitary substance view would be that matter is all one substance, vibrating in a variety of ways.

all experience and all the needs of its consistent conceptualization.

Note well that I am not here denying validity to the *concept* of impermanence, but I am only reminding us that “impermanence” is a concept. Being a concept based on experience of change, it is indeed a valid concept. This is true whether such change be considered as real or illusory: it suffices that such change appears phenomenologically for a concept of it to be justified.

The *principle* of impermanence is more than that the mere concept. It is a *generalization* of that concept. It is not a mere statement that change exists – it is a statement that only change exists, i.e. that everything is continually changing and there is no underlying rest. Now, *such a general proposition logically can simply not be validated with reference to experience alone*. There is no epistemologically conceivable way that, sitting in meditation, the Buddha would be able to *experience* this (or any other) principle *directly*.

This principle (like any other) *can indeed* conceivably be validated as universal, *but only* by additive methodology. It must be considered as a hypothesis, to be tested again and again against all new experiences, and compared to competing hypotheses as regards explanatory value. The result is thus at best *an inductive truth*, not a pure experience or a pure deduction from experience.

Furthermore, in addition to the generalization from particular experiences of change to a metaphysical principle of the ubiquity of change, the principle of impermanence involves a second fundamental generalization. Since it is a negative principle, it involves the act of generalization inherent in all negation; that is, the generalization from “I found no permanence in my present experience” to “There was no permanence to be found in my present experience”.

While the conclusion of negation by such generalization is not in principle logically invalid, *it is an inductive, not a deductive conclusion*. It stands ab initio on a more or less equal footing with the competing speculation that there might well be an underlying permanence of some sort. The latter positive hypothesis could equally well be (and sometimes is) posited as a postulate, to be gradually shown preferable to the negative assumption using adductive means.

Even within meditation, note, constancies do appear side by side with changing phenomena, if we pay attention to them. Thus, for instance, if I meditate on water, I may reflect on the inconstancy of its surface; but I may also reflect on the underlying constancy (during my period of meditation, at least) of the horizon or shoreline, or of rocks in or around it, or simply of the fact of water, or its color and consistency, etc. I may, moreover, later discover that water is uniformly composed of H<sub>2</sub>O.

Seen in this light, the status of the principle of impermanence is considerably less sure. To present such a principle as an absolute truth knowable directly or obtained by some sort of infallible analysis of experience would be dishonest.

All this is not said to annul the important moral lessons to be drawn from observation of impermanence. A “principle” of impermanence may still be proposed, if we take it as heuristic, rather than hermeneutic – i.e. as a useful “rule of thumb”, which helps us realize that it is useless to attach importance to mundane things, and enjoins us to strive for higher values. Beauty is passing; pleasures are ephemeral. Life is short, and there is much spiritual work to be done...

With regard to predication of impermanence, it is relevant to ask whether the concrete data (experiences, appearances) referred to are phenomenal or non-

phenomenal, i.e. whether they can be physically or mentally seen, heard, felt, smelt or tasted, or instead are intuited. To indicate that the data at hand is phenomenal, and so particularly transient, does not in itself exclude that relatively less transient non-phenomenal data might also be involved behind the scenes. That is, while current objects might be perceptibly transient, it does not follow that the one perceiving them is equally transient.

Of course, whether the data is phenomenal or not, it may still be transient. However, transience has degrees. Data may be merely momentary, or it may appear more continuously over a more extended period of time. The issue here is not “transient or eternal”, as some Buddhist philosophers seem to present it. The issue is “momentary or continuous” – with the eternal as the extreme case of continuity. It is analytically erroneous to ignore or exclude offhand periods of existence that are longer than a mere ‘moment’ of time and shorter than ‘eternity’.

Moreover, as already pointed out, the underlying claim that all phenomena, or for that matter all non-phenomenal events, are transient is not something that can be directly observed – but can only be based on generalization. There is no *a priori* logical necessity about such ontological statements – they are epistemologically bound to be inductive. Even if all appearances experienced by me or you so far seem transient, there might still be eternal existents our own transience makes us unable to observe.

Conversely, only an eternal being could *experience* eternity – and it would take such a being... an eternity to do so (not a mere few hours, days or years of

meditation)!<sup>68</sup> This however does not exclude the possibility of ascribing eternity to certain things on conceptual deductive grounds. For example, I can affirm the laws of thought to be eternally true, since they are incontrovertible; or again, I can affirm all contradictions or exclusions of a middle to be eternally false.

Furthermore, Buddhists implicitly if not explicitly ascribe some sort of eternity to the existential ground in or out of which all transient phenomena bubble up. That is, although particular existents may well all be transient, the fact of existence as such is eternal. Therefore, their argument is not really intended as a denial of any permanence whatsoever (as it is often presented), but more moderately as a denial of

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<sup>68</sup> I am not sure of the truth of this statement of mine. I have in the past argued (among other reasons so as to provide an argument in favor of the doctrine that God can tell the future) that this issue hinges on the span of time an onlooker can perceive in one go. The higher one is spiritually placed, the longer a ‘moment’ of time covers. God, who is “above it all”, at the peak of spiritual perspective, can see all time (all the things we class under the headings of past, present and future) as the present moment. Proportionately, when we humans meditate, the present is longer, i.e. the ‘moment’ of time our attention can include at once is enlarged. Thus, one (conceivably) need not wait forever to experience eternity, but may ultimately do so through spiritual elevation. This may be the “eternal now” experience many people have reported having. Note additionally that, if we accept this hypothesis, we have to apply it not only to external events (i.e. phenomenal physical and mental experiences) but also to inner experience (i.e. intuitions of cognitions, volitions and valuations by self). The latter is more difficult, more problematic, because it implies that *one's own* being and experience is already consumed, i.e. all telescoped into the present. Still, why not.

permanence to particular existents, i.e. to fragments of the totality. And of course, in that perspective, their insight is right on.

## 2. Not an essence, but an entity

Buddhist philosophers have stressed the idea of impermanence, with a view to deny the existence of “essences” in both the objective and subjective domains. However, an impermanent essence is not a contradiction in terms. This means that the question of essences is more complex than merely an issue of impermanence. Several epistemological and ontological issues are involved in this question. We have indicated some of these issues in the preceding chapters.

With regard to the objective domain, comprising the material and mental objects of experience, i.e. the phenomena apparently experienced through the senses or in the mind – their reasoning is that we never perceive firm “essences” but only constantly changing phenomena; whence, they conclude, the objects we refer to are “empty”.

In reply, I would say that it is true that many people seem to imagine that the “entities” we refer to in thought (e.g. a dog) have some unchanging core (call it “dogness”), which remains constant while the superficial changes and movements we observe occur, and which allow us to classify a number of particulars under a common heading (i.e. all particular dogs as “dogs”).

But of course, if we examine our thought processes more carefully, we have to modify this viewpoint somewhat. We do “define” a particular object by referring to some seemingly constant property (or conjunction of properties) in it – which is preferably

actual and static, though (by the way) it might even be a habitual action or repetitive motion or a mere potential.

Note too, there may be more than one property eligible for use as a definition – so long as each property is constant throughout the existence of that object and is exclusive to it. The defining property does not shine out as special in some way, and in some cases we might well arbitrarily choose one candidate among many.

However, defining is never as direct and simple an insight as it may at times seem. It requires a complex rational activity, involving comparison and contrast between different aspects and phases of the individual object, and between this object and others that seem similar to it in some respects though different from it in others, and between that class of object and all others. Thus, the property used as definition is knowable only through complex conceptual means.

Therefore, our mental separation of one property from the whole object or set of objects is an artifice. And, moreover, our referring to all apparently similar occurrences of that property as “one” property gives the impression of objective unity, when in fact the one-ness is only in the mind of the beholder (though this does not make it unreal). In short, the definition is only an abstraction. It indeed in a sense exists in the object as a whole, but it is only distinguishable from the whole through cognition and ratiocination.

The material and mental objects we perceive are, therefore, in fact nothing other than more or less arbitrary collections of phenomena, among which one or more is/are selected by us on various grounds as “essential”. The “essence” is a potential that can only be actualized relative to a rational observer; it has no independent actual existence when no observer is present. Definition gives us a mental “handle” on objects, but it is not a substitute for them.

An entity is not *only* its definition. An entity is the sum total of innumerable qualities and events related to it; some of these are applicable to it throughout its existence (be that existence transient or eternal) and some of them are applicable to it during only part(s) of its existence (i.e. have a shorter duration). Although the defining property must be general (and exclusive) to the object defined, it does not follow that properties that are not or cannot be used for definition cease to equally “belong to” the object.

It is inexcusably naïve to imagine the essence of an entity as some sort of ghost of the object coterminous with it. In fact, the entity is one – whatever collection of circumstances happens to constitute it. The distinction of an essence in it is a pragmatic measure needed for purposes of knowledge – it does not imply the property concerned to have a separate existence in fact. The property selected is necessarily one aspect among many; it may be just a tiny corner of the whole entity.

We may thus readily agree with Buddhists that named or thought-of objects are “empty”; i.e. that it is inaccurate to consider each object as really having some defining constant core, whether phenomenal or non-phenomenal. But the Buddhists go on from there and apply the same reasoning to the Subject (or soul) – and this is where we may more radically disagree.

They imply that the Subject of cognitions is itself cognized by way of phenomena, i.e. like any other object. This idea of theirs has some apparent credibility due to the fact that they confuse the Subject with his ‘inner’, mental phenomena<sup>69</sup>. But though such

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<sup>69</sup> See the Buddhist doctrine of the Five Component-Groups. In this doctrine, the fourth and fifth groups, comprising the “determinants” and the “cognitive faculty”,

phenomena are indeed internal *in comparison to* physical phenomena sensed in the body or further out beyond it, they are strictly speaking external in comparison to the “soul”.

Anyone who reflects a little would not regard, say, the stuff of a dream he had as himself. His self-awareness is the consciousness of something more inward still than the stuff of imaginations. He is the one experiencing and generating the imaginations. The soul is not a phenomenon – it has no smell, taste, solidity, tune or color; it is something *non-phenomenal*.

The self is not perceived as an object in the way of mental phenomena (as the Buddhists suggest), but is intuited directly in the way of a Subject apperceiving itself (at least when it perceives other things, or when it expresses itself through volition or valuation). Our soul is not a presumed “essence” of our mental *phenomenal* experiences; it is an entirely different sort of experience.

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are particularly misleading, in that cognition, volition and valuation, the three functions of the self, are there presented without mention of the self, as ordinary phenomenal events. That is, the doctrine commits a *petitio principii*, by depicting psychic events in a manner that deliberately omits verbal acknowledgment of the underlying self, so as to seem to arrive at the (foregone) conclusion that there is no self. No explanation is given, for instance, as to how we tell the difference between two phenomenally identical actions, considering one as really willed by oneself, and the other as a reactive or accidental event – for such differentiation (which is necessary to gauge degrees of responsibility) is only possible by means of self-knowledge, i.e. introspection into one’s non-phenomenal self, and they have dogmatically resolved in advance not to accept the existence of a cognizing, willing and valuing self.

Of course, it could still be argued that – even granting that acts of cognition, volition and valuation are non-phenomenal events, known by self-intuition – such acts are mere momentary events, which do not necessarily imply an underlying non-phenomenal continuity (an abiding self). Admittedly, the fact that we cannot physically or mentally see, hear, smell, taste or touch the acts of the self does not logically imply that the self is abiding.

However, note that this last is an argument in favor of the possibility that the self may be impermanent – it does not constitute an argument against the existence of a self (whether lasting or short-lived) underlying each act of cognition, volition or valuation. That is, these functions are inconceivable without *someone* experiencing, willing and choosing, even if it is conceivable that the one doing so does not abide for longer than that moment.<sup>70</sup>

To deny that cognition, volition and valuation necessarily involve a self is to place these apparent events under an aetiological régime of natural determinism or spontaneity. That subsumes willing under mechanistic causation or chance happenstance – i.e. it effectively denies the existence of freewill.

Similarly, it implies that there is no more to knowing than the storing of symbols in a machine (as if the

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<sup>70</sup> Note well that I am careful to say the *possibility* that the self is impermanent; which does not exclude the equal possibility that the self is permanent. The mere fact that the cognitions, volitions and valuations of the self are impermanent does not by itself allow us to draw any conclusion either way about the permanence or impermanence of the self. Additional considerations are needed to draw the latter conclusion.

“information” stored in a computer has any knowledge value without humans to cognize and understand it, i.e. as if a computer can ever at all *know*). And again, it implies that valuing or disvaluing is no more relevant to a living (and in particular sentient) being than it is to a stone.

The effective elimination of these three categories (i.e. knowing, willing and valuing) by Buddhists (and extreme Materialists, by the way) is without logical justification, because in total disaccord with common experience.

The confusion may in part be caused or perpetuated by equivocation. Because we often use the word “mind” – or alternatively, sometimes, “consciousness” – in a loose, large sense, including the soul, it might be assumed that the soul is similar to mental phenomena in its substance. But the soul and mind are only proximate in a spatial sense, if at all. The soul is not made of mental stuff or of consciousness – the soul uses consciousness to observe mental and physical events (and, indeed, its intimate self).

The self or soul is not an abstraction from mental or physical phenomena. It receives and cognizes mental and material information (and it indirectly chooses and wills mental and material events) – but it is not identical with such information (or events).

Only intuited events of cognition, volition and valuation can be considered as truly parts of, and direct responsibilities of, the soul. And even here, it would be inaccurate to necessarily equate the soul to these functions. Such a positivistic approach is a hypothesis to be adopted inductively only if we find no good reason to adopt the alternative hypothesis that the soul is more than the evidence of its functioning.

Thus, the inevitable impermanence of the phenomenal world cannot be construed as necessarily implying a similar impermanence for the self. Even granting that material and mental objects are “empty”, it does not follow that the self is a non-entity, i.e. non-existent as a distinct unit. The self is not a material or mental substance or entity – but it is a non-phenomenal substance and entity. We may legitimately label that distinct substance ‘spiritual’ and that entity ‘soul’.

Note well that such labeling does not preclude the idea, previously presented, that the individual soul’s individuation out from the universal spiritual substance or universal soul is ultimately illusory. We may thus well consider the soul as impermanent in its individuality, while regarding its spiritual substance as eternal.

Upon reflection, this is pretty much the way we view the phenomenal realm, too – as consisting of impermanent illusory individual entities emerging in a permanent real universal substratum. Their illusoriness is mainly due to the conventionality of their individual boundaries.

At this stage, then, we find ourselves with two ‘monistic’ domains – the one giving rise to material and mental phenomena and the other giving rise to spiritual entities (souls). Obviously, such double ‘monism’ is not logically coherent! We therefore must assume that these two apparently overlapping domains are really ultimately somehow one and the same.

So, we have perhaps come full circle, and our opinions end up pretty much coinciding with the Buddhists’ after all. We ought perhaps to lay the stress, instead, on our difference with regard to *continuity*.

According to Buddhist theory, the self has no continuity, i.e. our self of today is not the same person as our self of yesterday or of tomorrow. In this perspective, they are

causatively *connected*, in the sense that earlier conglomerations of phenomena constituting a self ‘cause’ later ones – but there is no *thread of constancy* that can be identified as the underlying one and the same entity. It is not a case of mere succession of totally discrete events; but there is no essential identity between the events, either.

However, many (myself included) object to this theory on various grounds. While we may admit that one can logically regard selfhood (i.e. being a Subject and Agent) as punctual at every instant without having to assume its extension over a lifetime, we must realize that such an assumption removes all logical possibility of a concept of moral responsibility for past actions.

If one is no longer ever the same person as the person committing a past virtuous or vicious act, then no good deed may be claimed by anyone or rewarded, and no crime may be blamed on anyone or punished. Ex post facto, strictly speaking, the doer of any deed no longer exists. Similarly, looking forward, there is nothing to be gained or lost by any Agent in doing anything, since by the time any consequences of action emerge the Agent has already disappeared.

In such a framework, all personal morality and social harmony would be completely destroyed. There would be no justification for abstaining from vice or for pursuing virtue. Even the pursuit of spiritual realization would be absurd. Of course, some people do not mind such a prospect, which releases them from all moral obligations or responsibility and lets them go wild.

It is very doubtful that Buddhism (given its overall concerns and aims) supports such a nihilist thesis<sup>71</sup>. In

<sup>71</sup> Although the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna seems to relish it.

any case, such a viewpoint cannot be considered credible, in the light of all the above observations and arguments.

### 3. Relief from suffering

Many people look to meditation as a momentary oasis of peace, a refuge from the hustle and bustle of the world, a remedy against the stresses and strains of everyday living. They use it in order to get a bit of daily peace and calm, to get ‘centered’ again and recover self-control, so as to better cope with their lives. Even so, if they practice it regularly, over a long enough period, for enough time daily, they are sure to discover anyway its larger, more radical spiritual benefits.

One general goal of meditation we have not so far mentioned is relief from suffering. We all to varying degrees, at various times of our lives, experience suffering – and nobody really likes it<sup>72</sup>. The wish to avoid or rid oneself of suffering is often the primary impulse or motive for meditation, before we develop a broader perspective (like “spiritual development”, for instance) relating to this practice.

Thus, “liberation” is often taken to at first mean “liberation from suffering”, before it is understood as “liberation from restraints on the will”. These two interpretations are not as opposed as they might seem, because suffering is *a negative influence on volition*, so when we free ourselves of the former, we experience the

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<sup>72</sup> Not even masochists, who use one kind of pain as a palliative against another kind of pain. For instance, they might pursue physical pain to avoid having to face some sense of guilt or to forget some unpleasant childhood experience.

latter's release. Contentment, the antithesis of suffering, implies a smoothly flowing life.

The relation between meditation and relief from suffering is not always simple and direct. Although it is true that over time meditation renders one immune to many disturbances, it may first for a while make us much more sensitive to them<sup>73</sup>. When we are more unconscious, our faculties function in coarser ways, so we feel less. As we refine our faculties, and become more conscious, we naturally feel more clearly. For this reason, a meditator may even on occasion find inner peace a bit scary and build a resistance to it, like someone who gingerly avoids a surface he suspects has a static electricity charge<sup>74</sup>. Peace, too, takes getting used to.

Suffering should not be confused with pain, but rather refers to our psychological response to feelings of pain. Some people cannot handle felt pain at all; whereas some, though they feel the same pain, do not take it to heart as much. Moreover, suffering refers not only to experienced pain, but may refer to lack of pleasure; i.e. to the frustration of not getting pleasure one wished for

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<sup>73</sup> A meditator may barely notice a sudden loud noise like an explosion, yet find "music" like rock or techno (with very few mellow exceptions) utterly unbearable! In contrast to a non-meditator, who might jump up with fright at the explosion, yet find supermarket canned music relaxing.

<sup>74</sup> Such resistance has been called "the dread of enlightenment". In fact, most people who have heard of meditation but have never dared to try it have this dread. They think that they will somehow get lost and drowned in the sea of enlightenment. Indeed, they will do so – in the sense that they will lose their individuality. But what must be understood is that this prospect is not frightful but cause for elation.

or expected, or of having lost pleasure one had for a while.

All this of course concerns mental as well as bodily pain or pleasure. Pain or pleasure may be felt as a purely physical sensation (e.g. a burnt finger or a pang of hunger); or as a visceral sentiment occurring in the body but having a mental cause (e.g. cold fear in the belly or warm love in the chest); or again, as a purely mental experience (e.g. a vague feeling of depression or elation).

Suffering primarily refers to actual pain; but it often refers to remembered or anticipated pains. For example, one may suffer for years over a bad childhood experience; or again, one may suffer much in anticipation of a big and difficult job one has to do soon. Suffering can also relate to abstract or conceptual things, whether past, present or future. For example, one might suffer at the general injustice of life. In all such cases, however, some present concrete negative feelings are felt, and the suffering may be taken to refer to them.

Buddhist teaching has the fact of human suffering at its center. This is made evident in the Four Noble Truths taught by the founder of this religion, viz.: (1) that life is suffering, i.e. that suffering of some kind or another is inevitable in the existence of sentient beings like ourselves; (2) that such suffering has a cause, namely our *attachments* to things of this world, our desire for pleasures and aversion to pains; (3) that we can be rid of suffering, if we rid ourselves of its cause (attachment); and finally, that the way to be rid of suffering is through the Eightfold Path.

The latter list of means includes meditation, as a very effective tool for discovering one's attachments and the ways to break away from our addiction to them. Just as soon as one begins to practice meditation, one discovers its power to make us relatively indifferent to pain or lack

of pleasure – i.e. to make us suffer less readily and intensely.<sup>75</sup>

Buddhists argue, additionally, that the ultimate obstacle to freedom from suffering is belief in a self – for to have a self is to have *particular interests*, and therefore to experience pain when these interests are frustrated (as is inevitable sooner or later) and pleasure when they are (momentarily) satisfied. It follows, in their view, that liberation from suffering (the third Noble Truth) would not be conceivable, if the “emptiness” of the self were not advocated. For only a ‘non-self’ can be free from the blows inherent to an impermanent world like ours.

However, I beg to differ from this doctrine, not to categorically reject it, but to point out that an alternative doctrine is equally possible. We could equally argue, from a Monotheistic point of view, that when the individual soul dissolves back in the universal Soul, which is God, it is conceivably free from all subjection to the vagaries of this material-mental world. The illusion of individuation, rather than the alleged illusion of selfhood, may be considered a sufficient cause of liability to suffering; and the removal of this cause may suffice to remove suffering.

Again I emphasize: the debate about the self is theoretical and does not (in my view) affect the effectiveness of meditation.

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<sup>75</sup> In yoga, they teach an attitude called *pratyahara*, which consists in focusing clearly on pain one is feeling, calmly assessing its exact extent and intensity; after a while, a pain thus stared at tends to disappear or at least it feels less urgent. This is, then, a sort of detachment from or transcendence of pain – not through avoiding it, but by facing it.

The practical lesson to draw from the Buddhist teaching is the importance of ‘attachment’ in human psychology. This realization, that the root of suffering is the pursuit of supposed pleasures, or avoidance of pains, is central. Anxiety, frustration, vexation, anger, disappointment, depression – such emotions are inevitable under the regime of attachment, in view of the impermanence of all mundane values.

If worldly pleasure of any sort is pursued, pain is sure to eventually ensue. If the pursuit of pleasure is successful, such success is necessarily short-lived, and one is condemned to protect existing pleasure or pursue pleasure again, or one will feel pain at one’s loss. If the pursuit of pleasure is unsuccessful, one experiences the pain of not having gotten what one wanted, and one is condemned to keep trying again and again till successful. Similarly, the avoidance of pain is a full-time job with no end in sight – a pain in itself.<sup>76</sup>

It is therefore wise to steer clear of attachment, and develop a more aloof approach to the lower aspects of life. This not only saves one from eventual suffering, but releases one’s energies for the pursuit of lasting spiritual values.

Meditation helps us (the self, the soul) to objectify and thus transcend the feelings experienced in body and

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<sup>76</sup> Suffering takes many intricate or convoluted forms. Consider for instance the frustration of a rich man, who already has everything he could possibly need or want, and so finds nothing new to spend his money on. He is not free of material attachments, he has the necessary material means, but the world has nothing more or new to offer him. This is a danger of riches – because the tendency in such situations is to turn to new, more and more perverse, sensations.

mind. This can be understood by contrasting two propositional forms:

- “I feel [this or that feeling]”, and
- “I am experiencing [having a certain body-mind feeling]”.

These two sentences might be considered superficially equivalent – but their different structure is intended to highlight important semantic differences. In (a), the subject “I” is a vague term, and the verb and its complement are taken at face value. In (b), the subject “I” is a more specific term, and the verb and complement are intended with more discrimination.

In (a), the subject considers the act of feeling a feeling as its own act, an extension of itself. In (b), the subject lays claim only to the cognitive fact of experiencing, considering all else as mere object relative to this exclusively cognitive act. The sense of “I” is therefore clearly different in the two sentences: in (a), the ego is meant, whereas in (b) it is the self or soul that is meant.

This is to illustrate that to transcend feelings, we have to objectify them, and more precisely identify our “I” or self with our spiritual dimension (or soul) rather than with our body and mind.

## 10. Illogical discourse

*Drawn from Logical and Spiritual Reflections (2008-9), book 3, chapters 8-10 and addendum I.*

### 1. The game of one-upmanship

People who think the law of non-contradiction and/or the law of the excluded middle is/are expendable have simply not sufficiently observed and analyzed the formation of knowledge within themselves. They think it is just a matter of playing with words, and they are free to assert that some things might be “both A and not A” and/or “neither A nor not A”. But they do not pay attention to how that judgment arises and is itself judged.

They view “A is A”, etc.<sup>77</sup>, as verbal statements like any other, and think they can negate such statements like all others, saying “A is not A”, etc. But in fact, negation is not possible as a rational act without acceptance of *the significance of negation inherent in the second and third laws of thought*, in comparison to the first law of thought. To say “not” at all meaningfully, I must first accept that “A cannot be not A” and that “there’s no third alternative to A and not A”.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Incidentally, I notice people on the Internet nowadays labeling the three laws of thought (LOT): LOI, LNC and LEM, for brevity’s sake. Sure, why not?

<sup>78</sup> Some logicians accept the law of non-contradiction as unavoidable, but consider the law of the excluded middle as expendable: this modern notion is quite foolish. *Both* laws are needed and appealed to in both deductive logic and in

To try to introduce some other (less demanding) definition of negation is impossible, for true negation would still have to be thought of (in a hidden manner or using other words). Inventing a “many-valued logic” or a “fuzzy logic” cannot do away with standard two-valued logic – the latter still remains operative, even if without words, on a subconscious level. We have no way to think conceptually without affirmation and denial; we can only pretend to do so.

Many “modern” logicians are so imprisoned by symbolic logic that they have lost contact with the intended meanings of their symbols. For this reason, the symbols ‘X’ and ‘not X’ seem equivalent to them, like ‘X’ and ‘Y’. But for classical logicians, a term and its negation have a special relationship. The negation of X refers to *all but X*, i.e. everything that is or might be in the whole universe other than X.<sup>79</sup>

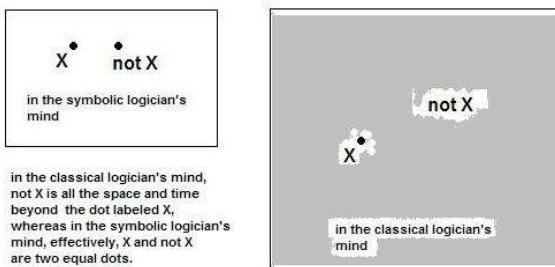
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inductive logic. They do not only serve for validation (e.g. of syllogisms or of factorial inductions), but they generate questions and research (e.g. what does this imply? or what causative relation can be induced from that?). Moreover, they are mirror images of each other, meant to complement each other so as to exhaust all possibilities, and they ultimately imply each other, and both imply and are implied by the law of identity.

<sup>79</sup> Note that difference does not imply incompatibility. Two things, say X and Y, may be different, yet compatible – or even imply each other. We are well able to distinguish two things (or characteristics of some thing(s)), even if they always occur in tandem and are never found elsewhere. Their invariable co-incidence does not prevent their having some empirical or intellectual difference that allows and incites us to name them differently, and say that X is not the same thing as Y. In such case, X as such will exclude Y, and not X as such will include Y, even though we can say that X implies Y, and not X implies not Y.

The diagram below illustrates how differently these people effectively visualize negation:

Figure 3. Visualizations of negation



Obviously, if a person mentally regards ‘X’ and ‘not X’ as commensurate, he will not understand why they cannot both be affirmed or both be denied at once; the second and third laws of thought will seem to him prejudicial and conventional. To return to a rational viewpoint, that person has to become conscious of the radical intent of the act of negation; it leaves no space for mixtures or for additional concoctions.

Bipolar logic is not a mere “convention”, for the simple reason that making a convention presupposes we have a choice of two or more alternatives, whereas bipolarity is the only way rational thought can at all proceed. We do not arbitrarily agree bipolarity, because it is inherent in the very asking of the question. To claim something to be conventional is already to acknowledge the conflict between it and the negation of it, and the lack of anything intelligible in between the two.

The motive behind the attempts of some thinkers to deny the laws of thought (i.e. the laws of proper affirmation and denial) is simply an ego ambition to “beat the

system”, or more specifically (in the case of Western philosophers) to surpass Aristotle (the one who first made these laws explicit objects of study). “You say X? I will ‘up the ante’ and say Not X (etc.) – and thus show I am the greatest!”

This is not mere perversity – but a sort of natural denial instinct gone mad. For, funnily enough, to deny some suggestion (including the suggestion there are three laws of thought) is in the very nature of conceptual knowing, a protective mechanism to make sure all alternative interpretations of fact are taken into consideration. This is precisely the faculty of negation – the very one which gives rise to the need for the laws of thought! The problem here is that it is being turned on itself – it is being over-applied, applied in an absurd way.

This can go on and on ad infinitum. Suppose I say “A” (meaning “A but not notA”), you answer “not A” (meaning “notA but not A”)<sup>80</sup>; I reply “both A and notA”, you oppose “neither A nor notA”; what have we said or achieved? Perhaps I will now say: “all of these four alternatives”; and you will reply: “none of these four alternatives”. Then I trump you, asserting: “both these last two alternatives” and you answer: “neither of them”. And so forth. Whither and what for?

A more complex version of the same game of one-upmanship can be played with reference to the laws of thought:

<sup>80</sup> Note that if we start admitting the logical possibility of “A and notA” (or of “not A and not notA”), then we can no longer mention “A” (or “notA”) alone, for then it is not clear whether we mean “A with notA” or “A without notA” (etc.). This just goes to show that normally, when we think “A” we mean *“as against notA”* – we do not consider contradictory terms as compatible.

1. A is A (affirming the law of identity).
2. A is not A (denying the law of identity).
3. Both (1) and (2). A is A, and A is not A. (disregarding the law of non-contradiction).
4. Neither (1) nor (2). A is not A, and A is not not A (disregarding the law of the excluded middle).
5. Both (3) and (4).
6. Neither (3) nor (4).
7. Both (5) and (6).
8. Neither (5) nor (6).
9. And so on and so forth.

Thus for the first law of thought; and similarly for the other two. We do not merely have a choice of four alternatives (the first four in the above list), a so-called ‘tetralemma’, but an infinite choice of denials of denials of denials... *How would we even evaluate the meaning of all these alternatives without using the laws of thought? They would all be meaningless, because every proposed interpretation would be in turn deniable.*

Thus, the attempt to propose a radically “alternative logic”, instead of the standard (Aristotelian) logic, is really *the end of all intelligible logic*, the dissolution of all rationality. It is not a meaningful option but a useless manipulation of meaningless symbols. None of it makes any sense; it is just piling up words to give an optical illusion of depth. People who engage in such moronic games should clearly not be granted the status of “logicians”.

## 2. In Buddhist discourse

Opposition by some Western logicians to (one or more of) the laws of thought is mostly naïve symbolic games,

without any profound epistemological or ontological reflection; of quite another caliber is the opposition to these laws found in some Buddhist literature<sup>81</sup>. But we can, with a bit of effort of reflection, explain away the apparent antinomies in their discourse.

When Buddhist philosophers make statements of the form “not X and not notX”, they should not (or not always) be viewed as engaging in antinomy, or in rejection of the laws of thought. Rather, such statements are abridged expressions intending: “don’t look for X and don’t look for not X”, or “don’t think X and don’t think not X”, or “don’t say X and don’t say not X”, or “don’t attach to X and don’t attach to not X”, or the like.<sup>82</sup>

When thus clarified, statements superficially of the form “neither X nor not X” (or similarly, in some cases, “both X and not X”) are seen to be quite in accord with logic. For the laws of thought do not deny that you cannot *look for* ‘X’ and for ‘not X’, or for that matter for ‘both X and not X’, or even ‘neither X nor not X’. Similarly, with regard to *thinking* this or that, or to *claiming* this or that, or to *attaching* to this or that, etc.

The laws of logic would only say that you cannot at once ‘look for X’ and ‘not look for X’, and so forth. It does not say you cannot at once ‘look for X’ and ‘look for not

<sup>81</sup> I am of course over-generalizing a bit here, for emphasis. There are of course savvier Western logicians and less savvy Oriental (including Buddhist) logicians. A case of the latter I have treated in some detail in past works is Nagarjuna.

<sup>82</sup> For example, the following is a recommendation to avoid making claims of truth or falsehood: “Neither affirm nor deny... and you are as good as enlightened already.” *Sutra of Supreme Wisdom*, v. 30 – in Jean Eracle (my translation from French).

X', and so forth. The latter situation merely asserts that the issue of X or not X ought to be left *problematic*. An unsolved problem is not an antinomy. The most we can say is that whereas Buddhism might be deemed to enjoin us to accept such uncertainty as final, Western logic would recommend pressing on to find a solution of sorts.

Thus, in some cases, the apparent contradictions and inclusions of middle terms in Buddhist philosophy (and similarly in some other texts) are merely verbal. They are due to *inaccuracy in verbal expression*, omitting significant implicit aspects of what is really meant. The reason for such verbal brevity is that the focus of such statements is *heuristic*, rather than *existential*. They are merely meant as “skillful means” (to the end of Realization), not as factual descriptions. That is to say, they are statements telling the subject *how to* proceed (cognitively, volitionally or in valuation), rather than telling him/her how things *are*.

To give an actual example from Buddhist literature, I quote the following passage from the *Wake-up Sermon* attributed to Bodhidharma:

“Mortals keep creating the mind, claiming it exists. And arhats keep negating the mind, claiming it doesn’t exist. But bodhisattvas and buddhas neither create nor negate the mind. This is what’s meant by the mind that neither exists nor doesn’t exist... called the Middle Way.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> P. 53. This passage is particularly clear in its explanation of “neither exists nor does not” as more precisely “is neither created nor negated”. Whereas the former is logically contradictory, the latter is in fact not so. What is advocated here is, simply put, non-interference.

When we face an unresolved contradiction or an unsolved problem of any sort, we are from the point of view of knowledge in front of a void. This ‘emptiness’ can be looked upon with anxiety, as a precipice, as a deficiency of means to deal with the challenges of life. Or it may be viewed as something pregnant with meaning, a welcome opportunity to dive fearlessly into infinity. The former attitude gives rise to Western science, the latter to Zen meditation.

Or again, consider the following quotation from Huang Po’s teaching:

“If only you will avoid concepts of existence and non-existence in regard to absolutely everything, you will then perceive the Dharma.”  
(P. 43.)

Here again, the meaning is clear. The Zen master is not here denying existence or non-existence or both; he is just telling us not to engage in judgments like ‘this exists’ or ‘this does not exist’ that are inherent to all conceptualization. He refers to such judgments as “dualism”, because they require a decision between two alternatives. Clearly, Huang Po’s statement is not a formally contradictory ontological proposition, but a *prima facie* coherent epistemological injunction not to be concerned with judging whether what one experiences is real or unreal.

Admittedly, some Buddhists<sup>84</sup> do take such a statement as implying that existence does not exist, or that it both

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<sup>84</sup> In truth, Huang Po is among them, since elsewhere he piously states: “from first to last not even the smallest grain

exists and does not exists, or neither exists nor does not exist. But as far as commonsense logic is concerned, existence does exist – i.e. whatever is, is (Aristotle's law of identity). Any clear denial of this fundamental truth would just be self-contradictory – it would deliberately ignore the fact and implications of its own utterance (i.e. that a statement has been made, alleging a truth, by someone to someone, etc.)

More precisely, in the present context, we must acknowledge that *whatever but appears, certainly exists* – whether it is eventually judged to be real or illusory. On this basis, we can reasonably interpret Huang Po (at least in the citation above) as simply saying “do not ask whether some particular (or general) thing exists or not, or whether it is real or not, because such questioning diverts your attention from a much more important insight into the nature of being”.

It should be added that, even though I above admit that Huang Po's position is *prima facie* coherent, it is not so coherent upon further scrutiny. He cannot strictly speaking utter a statement without using concepts and he cannot be understood by us without use of our conceptual faculty. All discourse is conceptual, even anti-conceptual discourse. That is, in the very act of preaching abstinence from concepts, *he is in fact not practicing what he preaches.*

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*of anything perceptible has ever existed or ever will exist*” (p. 127). This is a denial of all appearance, even as such. Of course, such a position is untenable, for the existence of mere appearance is logically undeniable – else, what is he discussing? Before one can at all deny anything, one must be able to affirm something. Also, the act of denial is itself an existent.

This shows that even persons presumed to be enlightened need concepts to communicate, and also that such conceptuality does not apparently (judging by the claims of those who practice it) affect their being enlightened. So concepts cannot be intrinsically harmful to enlightenment, and the claim that they must be eschewed is internally inconsistent! This is not a game of words (as some might argue) – it is a logical insight that cannot be waved off. One can only at best argue against excessive conceptualization.

In any event, it must be understood that Buddhist anti-conceptual philosophy is aimed at psychological development: it is primarily a “way” or “path”. Its focus is how to react to ordinary experiences, so as to get to see the ultimate reality beyond them. It refers to the object (X or not X), not independently (as in most Western logic), but as an object of *the Subject* (i.e. sought out, thought of, claimed, or attached to by the subject-agent). The latter ‘subjectivity’ (i.e. dependence on the subject-agent) is very often left implicit, simply because it is so pervasive. Notwithstanding, there are contexts in which the intent is more ‘objective’ than that<sup>85</sup>.

It should also be noticed that many of the contradictions or paradoxes that Buddhist philosophers produce in their discourse are due to their tendency to make apparently general statements that in the last analysis turn out to be less than all-inclusive. Even while believing that there is more to the world as a whole than what is commonly evident, they formulate their ideas about the phenomenal world as *unqualified universal propositions*. There are many examples of this tendency.

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<sup>85</sup> For a start, to claim a means as skillful is a kind of factual description.

“All is unreal”, says the *Dhammapada* (v. 279). Calling all unreal or illusory is of course possible *in imagination*, i.e. verbally – by taking the predicate ‘unreal’ or ‘illusory’ from its original legitimate subjects of application and applying it to ‘all’ subjects. Implicit in this manipulation is *an analogy* – i.e. a statement that just as within the realm of appearance some items are found not real and labeled illusory, so we can project a larger realm in which the whole current realm of appearance would seem unreal.

This explains how people assimilate that oft-repeated Buddhist statement, i.e. why it seems thinkable and potentially plausible. But it does not constitute logical justification for it. The only possible justification would be to personally experience a realm beyond that of ordinary experience. Even then, the logically consistent way to make the statement would be “all ordinary experience is unreal” (because saying just “all” would of course logically have to include the extraordinary experience).

Another frequently found example is “existence is suffering<sup>86</sup>. ” This statement is true, all too true, about the world we commonly experience, i.e. the world of material and mental phenomena. If one is observant, one discerns that we are always feeling some unpleasantness in the background of our existence. No earthly happiness is ever complete, if only because it is tenuous. Even sexual pleasure or orgasm – which more and more

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<sup>86</sup> This is the usual translation of the Sanskrit term is *dukkha*. This connotes not only physical and emotional pain, but more broadly mental deficiencies and disturbances, lack of full satisfaction and contentment, unhappiness, absence of perfect peace of mind.

of my contemporaries seem to regard as the ultimate ecstasy and goal of existence – is a pain of sorts<sup>87</sup>.

Buddhism has displayed extreme wisdom in emphasizing the fact of suffering, because once we realize it we are by this very simple realization already well on the way to being freed of suffering. If one were visiting hell, one would not expect to experience heaven there; likewise, it is natural in this halfway world to experience some suffering. I used to suffer a lot at the sight of people getting away with injustices or other ugly acts; but lately I just tell myself: “well, I am in samsara and this is normal behavior in samsara<sup>88</sup> – so long as I am here, I have to expect this kind of unpleasant experience and take it in stride!”

But the statement “existence is suffering” is wrongly formulated from the logical point of view, and for that reason it is bound to lead to paradoxes. For if we believe (as Buddhists do) that suffering can eventually be overcome (specifically, when nirvana is attained), then the truth of suffering must be formulated less universally as: “*mundane* existence is suffering”. The usual formulation of the first Noble Truth, “existence is suffering,” is not intended to be as all-inclusive as it seems – for suffering disappears according to the third Noble Truth when we become enlightened. Therefore,

<sup>87</sup> If we are sufficiently attentive, we notice the pain involved in sexual feelings. Not just a pain due to frustration, but a component of physical pain in the very midst of the apparent pleasure.

<sup>88</sup> Or, using Jewish terminology: “I am in *galut* (exile, in Hebrew), and such unpleasantness is to be expected here”. Note in passing, the close analogy between the Buddhist concept of samsara and the kabbala concept of galut.

to make the former consistent with the latter, it has to be rephrased more restrictively.

Another example of the tendency to artificially refuse to count the experience of enlightenment as part of the world as a whole is the idea that enlightenment takes us “beyond good and evil”. This is logically incorrect – if we regard enlightenment as the *summum bonum*, the ultimate good (which we do, if we enjoin people to prefer it to all other pursuits).

The phrase “beyond good and bad” is intended to stress the practical problem that pursuing good is as much a form of attachment as avoiding evil. The pursuit of worldly good things is ultimately bad, because it just ties us to this world and subjects us to the bad in it. And indeed, even the pursuit of liberation from this world, i.e. of an otherworldly good, is problematic, in that it involves the wrong attitude, a grasping or clinging attitude that is not conducive to success. All this is true, but tends towards paradox.

To avoid confusion, we must simply rephrase our goal as “beyond *pursuit* of good and avoidance of evil”. That is to say, we must admit that nirvana is ‘good’ in the most accurate sense of the term, while what we call ‘good’ in the world of samsara (i.e. wealth position, power, sensual pleasure, etc.) is really not much better than what we call ‘bad’. Alternatively, we should distinguish good in an absolute sense (the good of nirvana) and good in a relative sense (the goods within samsara). Relative goods would then to be classified as not so good from the absolute point of view.

The result of this change of perspective is that, rather than view existence as fundamentally bad (due to suffering), we may now view it as fundamentally good (since nirvana underlies all samsaric existence). Our common view and manner of existence is just an error of sorts, causing us much suffering; if we but return to

correct cognition and behavior, we will experience the natural good at the core of all things. Here, the illusory good and evil of the mundane are irrelevant, and we are fully immersed in the real good.<sup>89</sup>

To conclude – Buddhist discourse often leads to paradox or contradiction because it insists on using terms in conventional ways and uttering generalities that apply to only part of the totality of experience (namely, the mundane part, to the exclusion of the supramundane part). To avoid the doctrinal problems such discursive practices cause, we must either clearly specify the terms used as having such and such conventional senses, or particularize statements that were formulated too generally (i.e. which did not explicitly take into consideration the data of enlightenment).

### **3. Calling what is not a spade a spade**

Buddhism, no doubt since its inception, has a mix of logic and illogic in its discourse. Looking at its four main philosophical schools, Abhidharma, Prajnaparamita, Madhyamika and Yogacara, the most prone to discard the three laws of thought (i.e. Identity, Non-contradiction, Exclusion of the middle) was Madhyamika<sup>90</sup>. But this trend was started in the earlier

<sup>89</sup> We could read S. Suzuki as saying much the same thing, when he says: “Because we are not good right now, we want to be better, but when we attain the transcendental mind, we go beyond things as they are and as they should be. In the emptiness of our original mind they are one, and there we find perfect composure” (p.130).

<sup>90</sup> See my work *Buddhist Illogic* on this topic, as well as comments on Nagarjuna’s discourse in my *Ruminations*, Part I, chapter 5. I must stress that my concern, throughout those previous and the present critiques, is not to reject

Prajnaparamita, as examples from the *Diamond Sutra*<sup>91</sup> show.

We do, in this sutra, find samples of valid logical argument. For example, there is a well formed a fortiori argument in Section 12<sup>92</sup>: “wherever this sutra or even four lines of it are preached, that place will be respected by all beings... How much more [worthy of respect] the person who can memorize and recite this sutra...!” But we do also find plain antinomies, like “the Dharma... is neither graspable nor elusive” (said even though not graspable means elusive, and not elusive means graspable).

But the *Diamond Sutra* repeatedly uses a form of argument that, as a logician, I would class as a further twist in the panoply of Buddhist illogic. This states: **“What is called X is not in fact X; therefore, it is called X”** (or sometimes: **“What is called X is truly not**

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Buddhism as such, but to show that it can be harmonized with reason. I consider quite unnecessary and counterproductive, the attitude of many Buddhist philosophers, who seemingly consider Realization (i.e. enlightenment, liberation, wisdom) impossible without rejection of logic. My guiding principle throughout is that they are quite compatible, and indeed that reason is an essential means (together with morality and meditation) to that desirable end.

<sup>91</sup> Judging by its Sanskrit language, the centrality of the bodhisattva ideal and other emphases in it, this sutra is a Mahayana text. It is thought to have been composed and written in India about 350 C.E., though at least one authority suggests a date perhaps as early as 150 C.E. For comparison, Nagarjuna, the founder of Madhyamika philosophy, was active circa 150-200 C.E.; thus this Prajnaparamita text was written during about the same period, if not much later.

<sup>92</sup> Mu Soeng, p. 111.

**X; such is merely a name, which is why it is called X”).**

There are over twenty samples of this argument in the said sutra. Here is one: “What the Tathagata has called the Prajnaparamita, the highest, transcendental wisdom, is not, in fact, the Prajnaparamita and therefore it is called Prajnaparamita.” Here is another: “... what are called beings are truly no beings. Such is merely a name. That is why the Tathagata has spoken of them as beings.”<sup>93</sup>

What I am questioning or contesting here regarding this sort of discourse is only the “*therefore*” or “*which is why*” conjunction<sup>94</sup>. I am not denying that one might call something by an inappropriate name, or even that words can never more than approximate what one really wants to say. But to say that one is naming something X because it is not X – this is surely absurd and untenable. This is not merely ‘not calling a spade a spade’ – it is calling something a spade even while believing it not to be a spade! This is, at least on the surface, contrary to logic. If the label is not applicable, why apply it?

<sup>93</sup> In Mu Soeng: pp. 145 and 151, respectively. I spotted a similar argument in another Mahayana text: “And it is because for them [the bodhisattvas] training consists in not-training that they are said to be training” (my translation from a French translation) – found in chapter 2, v. 33 of the “Sutra of the words of the Buddha on the Supreme Wisdom” (see Eracle, p. 61).

<sup>94</sup> Assuming the translation in this edition is correct, of course (and it seems quite respectable; see p. ix of the Preface). My point is that no logician has ever formally validated such an argument; and in fact it is formally invalid, since the conclusion effectively contradicts a premise.

Moreover, why boast about this unconscionable inversion, saying “therefore”?

To say that something “is not in fact or truly X” is to imply that the word X has a sense that the thing under consideration does not fit into; in such case, why call that very thing ‘X’ against all logic? Why not just call it ‘not X’ (or coin for it some other, more specific name) and avoid paradox!

Discourse like “such is merely a name” is self-defeating anyway, since in fact it uses names that do convey some meaning. The sentence suggests no words have any valid reference, yet relies on the effectiveness of the words it utilizes to communicate its various intentions. It is a statement that tries to exempt itself from the criticisms it levels at *all* statements as such.

In the examples given above, the argument depends on our understanding of words like ‘Prajnaparamita’ (i.e. perfection of wisdom) or ‘beings’ – and yet at the same time tries to invalidate any such understanding. It cannot therefore be said to communicate anything intelligible.

Without doubt, we cannot adequately express ultimate reality (or God) in words. But it remains true that we can verbally express the fact of ineffability (as just done in the preceding sentence). There is no need to devalue words as such to admit that they have their limits.

Moreover, it is very doubtful that such paradoxical statements (like “name this X *because* it is not X”) are psychologically expedient to attain enlightenment; they just cognitively confuse and incapacitate the rational mind. Rather than silence the inquiring mind, all they actually do is excite it with subconsciously unanswered questions. Such nonsensical statements are products of

an unfortunate fashion that developed in Buddhism at a certain epoch<sup>95</sup>.

That sort of intellectual perversity came to seem profound, as it does to some postmodern thinkers in the West today, precisely because a logical antinomy implies nothing – and that emptiness of meaning is (wrongly) equated with the Emptiness underlying all phenomena. The gaping hole in knowledge left by antinomy gives the illusion of being pregnant with meaning, whereas in fact it is just evidence of ignorance. Note this well.

It should be added that there is indeed a sort of structural paradox in the meditative act – but the *Diamond Sutra*'s habit of ‘calling not a spade a spade’ is not it. The paradox involved is that if we pursue enlightenment through meditation, we cannot hope to attain it, for then our ego (grasping at this transcendental value as at a worldly object) is sustained; yet, meditation is the best way to enlightenment. So we must ‘just do it’ – just sit and let our native enlightenment (our ‘Buddha nature’) shine forth eventually.

It should also be reminded that Buddhism is originally motivated by strong realism. It is essentially a striving towards Reality. In this perspective, the Buddhist notion of “suchness” may be considered as a commitment to the Law of Identity. The enlightened man is one who perceives things, in particular and in general, *such as they really are*.

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<sup>95</sup> Although not entirely absent in the earlier Abhidharma literature and the later Yogacara literature, they are not uncommon in some Prajnaparamita literature (including the *Diamond Sutra*) and rather common in Madhyamika literature.

This is brought out, for instance, in the following Zen exchange. A monk asked Li-shan: “What is the reason [of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West, i.e. from India to China]”, to which the Zen master replied “Just because things are such as they are”, and in D. T. Suzuki’s commentary that this refers to “Suchness”<sup>96</sup>.

**Addendum** (2010), concerning the Diamond Sutra’s discourse. Although its form is paradoxical, it seems intelligible. How is this to be explained? What is the underlying logic that makes people accept such discourse in spite of its formal flaws? I can answer this with reference to another instance of such discourse, inspired by the said sutra. In *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po* (pp. 64-65), we find the following discourse, as translated by John Blofeld: “The fundamental doctrine of the Dharma is that there are no dharmas, yet that this doctrine of no-dharma is in itself a dharma; and now that the no-dharma doctrine has been transmitted, how can the doctrine of the dharma be a dharma?” (Blofeld explains that he introduced the word ‘doctrine’ in place of ‘dharma’ to avoid the confusion of the original Chinese sentence.)

Why is this statement somewhat intelligible? Let me rephrase it a little (square brackets mine): “The fundamental doctrine of the Dharma is that there are no [verbal] dharmas, yet that this doctrine of no-dharma is in itself a dharma; and now that the no-dharma doctrine has been transmitted [wordlessly], how can the doctrine of the dharma be a [verbal] dharma?” In other words, the non-verbal dharma transmission *cannot* be replaced by a verbal transmission, such as the present words.

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*The Zen Doctrine of No-mind*, p. 93.

Such words can merely talk about or somewhat describe the actual dharma transmission, but are incapable of being a substitute for it. Dharma transmission remains possible *only* non-verbally. As can be seen, the paradox arises only due to incompetent verbalization (if not a predilection for paradoxical statements). The underlying idea (that transmission of the mind of Zen can only be effectively performed wordlessly) is not paradoxical. It is quite intelligible (certainly there is no natural necessity that a mere description can do the job) and it can even be verbalized without paradox (as here done).

## 11. Causation and change

*Drawn from Logical and Spiritual Reflections (2008-9), book 3, chapters 11-14.*

### 1. Buddhist causation theory

Whereas skeptics such as Hume considered that *nothing has a cause*, or at least that if anything does cause anything else we cannot know about it – Buddhist philosophy went to the opposite extreme and advocated that *everything is interconnected to everything else*, claiming that this universal truth is knowable through enlightened cognition and not merely through induction.

This philosophy of “interdependence” or “co-dependence” sounds good at first sight, because it implies that none of us is an island unto himself or herself. It is an ethical teaching against selfishness and irresponsibility. We are all part of a complex tapestry of relations, and no one can pride himself or herself on true independence from the rest of us. We should be grateful to each other and lovingly help each other. To put it very idealistically: everyone is an indispensable part of myself.

But on a strictly logical level, this view is difficult to uphold. For, if everything were causally interconnected, then we could not inductively identify causes and effects, because we could never ‘remove’ or ‘add’ any cause or effect! We would thus be deprived of one of our main scientific techniques of causal logic.

To identify causality, we need to consider what happens around a phenomenon (say, X) in both its presence and its absence. We need to experiment different situations.

But the view that everything is both a cause and an effect of everything implies, for every X, both X and the negation of X to be always causally present, somehow. Universal contradiction seems to be required; that is, all contradictories coexisting and equally active at once.

We might at best say that this thesis implies that nothing has a complete and necessary causal relation to anything else, but all things are causally interrelated in the way of partial and contingent causation. Natural spontaneity and freewill are of course excluded from this thesis; it is essentially deterministic, note. But is it possible to even imagine partial-contingent causation without complete-necessary causation? I don't think so. But supposing it is arguable, there would be no logical way to prove it.

Logically, such claim can only be an arbitrary assumption. It follows that the universal mutual causality claimed by the Buddhist is only knowable, if at all, by purely intuitive means – no scientific proof of it is possible. Furthermore, such universal intuition necessitates (implies) omniscience of all things, everywhere, at all times. And though we project that God has such cognitive power, and the Buddhists consider that a human being can acquire it through enlightenment, omniscience is not something we ordinarily encounter or know how to prove.

In a past work of mine<sup>97</sup>, I explain how the Buddhist doctrine of co-dependence must not be taken as nugatory of the law of identity that 'facts are facts'. I want to reiterate it here, because this insight of mine hit the nail on the head with regard to the significance of co-dependence. The advocates of co-dependence explicitly argue for it by means of *diachronic* examples (sunlight causes growth of plant, plant causes feeding of

<sup>97</sup> *Buddhist Illogic*, chapter 8.

animals, etc.), i.e. across time; but subsequently, they tacitly intend it *synchronously*, i.e. in the present tense.

This is the hidden lie of this doctrine: the implication that somehow the present does not firmly and definitely exist, but currently ‘depends’ on things outside it (i.e. in past or future). In truth: once actual, the present’s existence is not in need to any support by anything else; it just is and that’s that. Co-dependence implies that even actual present existence is somehow tenuous. Of course, such antinomy is precisely the ‘paradoxical’ aspect of co-dependence that makes it so emotionally attractive to postmodern readers, and which makes this doctrine quite distinct from any other causal philosophy.

Note well that I am not saying that causation requires change. We can establish causation between static existents – by referring to different instances of a class, i.e. with reference to the extensional mode of causation. The natural mode of causation, on the other hand, implies underlying changes in individuals – even when we express it verbally as a relation of static characters, we mean that the change from presence to absence or vice versa of those characters is involved.

The paradoxical aspect of the co-dependence thesis is its claiming the possibility of causation without differences across space and time, i.e. entirely in the here and now. This is a logically unthinkable and unknowable sort of causation. It should hardly be necessary to say that the present, once present, is a done thing; it can no longer be affected by the present, the past or the future. The past, once past, is gone; it is no longer changeable. The future is the only potentially changeable thing<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>98</sup> And that only if we assume some indeterminism; otherwise, if the future is inevitable, it can hardly be considered as changeable. Certainly, though science fiction

We can use these logical insights to refute the Buddhists' view of the soul's mode of existence. They consider that the soul has "no real existence" (in itself, as an essence) because of its interdependence with everything else. They argue that the soul has actual past causes of generation (e.g. parents, food, etc.) and possible future causes of destruction (e.g. if the body dies, the soul disappears, say). But in truth, such retrospective and prospective causalities do not change the reality that once the soul is, and so long as it is, its actual present existence is, and it is independently of anything else.

The advocates of this idea, that the soul's existence is unreal, can be seen to profit from confusion between two terms: ontological dependence and epistemological dependence. Certainly, demonstrable past causes are indicative of what they call "dependent origination", but future causes cannot be assimilated by anticipation to the same concept. They might at best be eventually described as instances of "dependent obliteration"! Just because in our present minds the existence of the object (here, the soul) is at the center of a mass of past, present and future causes, it does not follow that all these items can be indistinguishably considered as present causes.

Nevertheless, it is possible and valuable to view the whole world as one big Ocean, and all things apparently in it as complex waves and swirls of its water, always in flux. This image is often proposed in Buddhist teachings, in seeming justification of the idea of co-dependence, as well as the idea of impermanence and others.

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fans and some science theorists are wont to imagine time travel, it has not to date been shown empirically possible, and therefore cannot be taken seriously.

Just as in a large body of water, a sea, a lake, a river, all the waves, though twirling and churning, are inseparable from the whole, so the waves of matter, mind and spirit in the universe, form a continuous whole. The various, changing many are ultimately a harmonious one. All subdivisions of the one in space or time are illusions or artificial projections by some observer. With regard to interdependence, a pressure in any locale of the whole is bound to somewhat affect all other locales.

This image reconciles the apparently conflicting views of the Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitean philosophy emphasizes appearance, materiality, multiplicity and change: “you cannot step into the same river twice” (or indeed, even once), for by the time you do so, both you and it have changed. In Parmenidean philosophy, the opposite is stressed: “everything is one and the same”. At first sight, these views seem contradictory – one is pluralist and relativistic, and the other is monist and absolutist; but using the image of a body of water they can be made compatible and complementary.

Initially, this analogy to water seems to call for a universal underlying substance – an assumed “ether”. But, as Einstein has pointed out, since the velocity of light is the same in all directions and displays no Doppler effect, there can be no ether! Thus, all is one and one is nothing! This interesting discovery of modern science seems to confirm the much older Buddhist view that the universal ocean is one of Emptiness (*Shunyata*). Judaism also has this notion of the All as originally Nothingness (*Yesh me-Ayin*).

Be that as it may, we must still consider and deal with the world as it appears – in all its details of variety, change and causality. And this task has to be fulfilled responsibly – i.e. in a credible, empirical and logical

manner. Vague, colorful, idealistic pronouncements will not do, however poetic they sound.

Thus, with regard to interdependence, it must be stressed that we can formally show with reference to causative syllogism that the cause of a cause cannot necessarily be regarded as a cause in turn – so the image of a tiny stir in one part of the ocean having an effect on all others is incorrect.<sup>99</sup>

## 2. A formal logic of change

I have in the past<sup>100</sup>, following Aristotle and Darwin, proposed three forms of change for logical consideration. Namely:

- a) *Alteration*, stated as “X gets to be Y”, meaning that something is characterized as X and not Y at one time and as X and Y at a later time. This is intended to imply that, while remaining X for the whole time under consideration, the individual thing concerned is successively not Y then Y. This signifies a mere change of attributes (not Y to Y), without essential change (X constant).
- b) *Mutation*, stated as “X becomes Y”, meaning that something is characterized as X (and not Y) at one time and as Y (and not X) at a later time. This is intended to imply that the individual thing concerned does not remain X or Y for the whole time under consideration, but is successively X then Y (these two being different, or incompatible, characterizations). This signifies metamorphosis or

<sup>99</sup> For further discussion of these issues, see my *The Logic of Causation*, especially chapters 10 and 16.

<sup>100</sup> See my *Future Logic*, chapter 17, and *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts*, chapter 14.

essential change (X to Y), insofar as the thing concerned is here defined by its being X or Y.

- c) *Evolution*, stated as “Xs evolve to Ys”, meaning that a set of things is characterized as Xs (and not Ys) at one time, *gives rise to another set* of things characterized as Ys (and not Xs) at a later time. Note well the intended implication here that the individuals subsumed under the classes X and Y are all different entities, although there is a significant causal relation between them. For instance, in the evolution of a living species, the earlier individuals (the Xs) are no longer present at the later stage (among the Ys), but they are their biological ancestors.

The first two forms of change can be expressed in terms of each other. “X gets to be Y (after not being Y)” can be stated as “X + notY becomes X + Y”; and conversely, “X becomes Y” can be stated as “Something gets to be notX + Y (after being X + notY)”. This is pointed out to show that the differentiation between changes of attribute and essence are relative, depending on what one focuses on as the substratum of change: in the case of alteration, the substratum is specifically the label “X”, whereas in the case of mutation, it is more vaguely “some thing”.

While the first two forms of change are found in Aristotelian logic, the third form did not become fully formulated (in Western philosophy<sup>101</sup>) till Darwin and after. Evolution is often confused with mutation, but they are clearly very different logical forms, note well. Two very different kinds of subsumption are involved.

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<sup>101</sup> Leaving aside some vague brief statements to similar effect in ancient Greek philosophy.

Mutation concerns an *individual* entity, which persists from its early state (X) to its later state (Y); in the plural (i.e. some or all X become Y), this form refers to many entities but still as individuals. Evolution distinctively refers to groups, so that the individuals referred to at the beginning of the change (Xs) are *not* the same as those referred to as the end of it (Ys). Implied in the latter case is, not only a qualitative change in the same individuals, but more thoroughly a change of individuals. Nevertheless, note well, the two sets of individuals are causally related in some way, i.e. there is still a *continuity* of sorts between them; this is why we say that one set has evolved into the other.

These three forms of change seem to cover all our ordinary discourse concerning change. On the surface, that analysis of change seems unassailable; but as we shall now see, it is possible to radically criticize it.

### 3. Buddhist critique of change

The above analysis of alteration and mutation, inspired by Aristotelian logic, has a weakness, in that it refers to “something”, some underlying abiding essence or static substratum in the midst of the forms of change considered. Thus, we defined alteration by saying “*something* is characterized as X and not Y at one time and as X and Y at a later time” and mutation as “*something* is characterized as X (and not Y) at one time and as Y (and not X) at a later time”.

In the case of alteration, the thing concerned retains the qualification X throughout the process of change; whereas in the case of mutation, the only implied constancy is the thing’s quality of existence. This relatively constant “something” in the midst of change may at first sight seem obvious, but upon reflection it is open to criticism. It is at least an element in our analysis

that has to be discussed and somewhat justified, assuming we find no reason to decidedly reject it.

Alteration is presented as a mere change of predicate, and mutation as a more radical change of definition, but in either case it is presumed that there is some one thing to which those changing predicates and definitions are being attributed, something that is unitary enough during such changes that we can continue to name it by the same label (viz. "X" in alteration or "something" in mutation).

The Buddhist critic would suggest that it is illegitimate to assume such underlying constancy without first establishing it; and that would seem something hard to do, in view of the transience of all things experienced. He would suggest that change in general fits more into the format of evolution than in those of alteration or mutation. For in the evolutionary model, the two terms of the proposition do not refer to the same individual instances, but to instances that have been in constant flux, and which are related to each other by mere causal succession rather than by uniformity in identity.

Alterations and mutations are of course in practice involved even in the course of evolutionary change (e.g. in evolution of species, the individuals of a species at any stage are themselves subject to alterations and mutations), but such underlying events remain tacit in the formal presentation of evolution, because even if such individual changes were imagined as totally absent, the definition of evolution would remain applicable provided earlier species generated later ones. Thus, the evolutionary theoretical model could be considered universal, if we do not assume (as Aristotle did) that individuals themselves change in alteration and mutation, but rather assume (as Buddhists suggest) that we are faced with successions of individual appearances, which we may assume are causally

connected. On this basis, rather than constancy of identity, an individual is named with the same name across time.

That is, my dog yesterday is not strictly-speaking the same dog as my dog today or tomorrow, but rather each momentary appearance (from his birth to his death) is caused by an earlier appearance and causes a later one, and for this reason I may repeatedly refer to all these apparently connected appearances as “my dog”. Strictly, then, a term like “my dog” is always meant in the present tense, but different instances of the present across time may be identified together under certain logical conditions (viz. causal continuity) and the term is then generalized to all my dog’s existence as if he were one abiding essence.

Moreover, one might venture, that which says “my dog” (i.e. me), is also in flux, and not quite the same over time. However, while it involves valid criticism, this Buddhist perspective has its own weaknesses and even faults.

Its main weakness of conception is the appeal to causal connection between successive appearances. What is here meant by causality – and on what basis is such relation between appearances to be established? That is, how do we claim theoretical knowledge of causality as such, and how do we claim knowledge of it in a particular case? For causality (or at least, causation) is never known through single instances, but through generalizations – and to generalize we have to assume certain uniformities.

Thus, our recognition and concept of causality would seem to be logically posterior to our recognition and concept of identity, and not prior to it (as the Buddhist critique requires). There is no immediate and incontrovertible knowledge of either similarity or causality, but both are ratiocinations, i.e. logical formats

or molds we (the cognizing Subject) try out tentatively on appearances, to gradually rationally organize them. These ratiocinations are inductive hypotheses, reflecting what seems to us applicable and true at a given stage in our knowledge development, but keeping an open mind for possible adaptations and corrections if (if ever) things appear differently at a later stage.

Moreover, it must be realized that this very discourse by the Buddhist critic is conceptual and verbal. The question must be asked: does the thesis proposed by the critic itself escape from the criticism used to support it? That is, if we apply the same criticism to the critic's discourse, do we not end up with the same doubt concerning it? The answer is obviously: yes.

Since the critic's discourse is itself verbal, it tacitly implies a uniformity of some sort in the midst of change, even while explicitly rejecting such uniformity as "merely verbal". To admit even a merely verbal uniformity is to admit uniformity as such. If we could not even say of two words that they are "one" in form and content, no discourse at all would be possible. If verbal uniformity is possible, then other types of uniformity may also be postulated. Since the critic resorts to words, he must admit the logical repercussions of such action<sup>102</sup>.

As regards the Buddhist claim that "everything is continually changing", it must not be naively accepted, even if it is presented by its proponents as the essence of wisdom. On the empirical level, at a given moment of

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<sup>102</sup> This of course is what the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna refused to admit, choosing rather to criticize others by means of logic while claiming for his views a privileged exemption from logic. Such *selective* logic cannot properly be called logic.

time that our consciousness encompasses as ‘the present’, we experience both changing and unchanging phenomena. The latter may in turn change the next present moment or at a later time; but the comparison involves memory and the assumption of time’s passing, and so is not purely experiential but partly judgmental. We may indeed experience changes in a given moment, but much of the changes we ‘experience’ occur over time and so are not purely empirical.

If we stand back and examine the existence of all phenomenal things across time, we may well conclude that everything we experience is subject to eventual change. But we must admit and keep in mind that *the rates of change* of different phenomena vary widely. While one thing is changing, another is apparently static. While one part of something changes, another is apparently static. There is not the total anarchy implied by the expression “everything changes”. We may thus mentally hold onto something for some time at any given time, even if we cannot hold onto everything.<sup>103</sup>

This something ‘held onto’ can be the underlying subject of a proposition about alteration or mutation. Such propositions are thus logically justifiable.

#### **4. Different strata of knowledge**

The fact of the matter is that we all experience appearances as same and/or different in various respects. This is a fundamental given of our ordinary

<sup>103</sup> For example, I know my computer will end up in smoke one day, but meanwhile it is here and I can well use it and rely on it. I expect my life to be longer than my computer’s existence, because people usually last longer than machines.

experience, which we must admit, even while granting that it ought not be taken as necessarily true in all cases. And the latter caveat is not some sort of transcendental knowledge, but itself merely the product of common experience – viz. that sometimes, what has seemed to us as similar at first sight has later (upon review or reflection) seemed to us as different, or vice versa.

The basis of our rational ordering of experience is experience. We realize that it involves rational ordering only at a much later stage, after much philosophical reflection; but initially, we just instinctively do it and believe in it. The classification of such initial rationality as naïve is only possible *by means of* this very same faculty; there is no other, higher faculty by which we can do it. The subtlety of distinguishing between pure experience and rationally ordered experience is *itself a product of* such rational ordering and cannot be used to justify it or criticize it.

Once this natural order of things is understood, we can begin to understand the development and validation of human knowledge. To avoid adopting superficially logical but deeply illogical theories, we must always make sure we test any suggested argument or explanation on itself. By such reflexive thinking, we save ourselves a lot of time and trouble. This leads to the realization that human knowledge is essentially inductive, rather than deductive. Deductive logic can indeed help us eliminate absurd and inappropriate constructs, but a positive theory depends mainly on gradual induction, using experience to form and develop ideas by trial and error.

The “something” underlying change (in the Aristotelian view) is seemingly justified by experience in that when we perceive the world around us or in us, at any given moment, some aspects of the whole field of experience (all sense organs included) seem to be in flux and others

seem to be static. There is no reason for us to admit the flux as real, while denying the evidence of our senses with regard to the unchanging aspects. We would have to provide some very convincing reason to allow such difference of evaluation. In the absence of justification, such difference of treatment would be arbitrary prejudice. It is therefore logical to admit both perceptions as equally empirical givens *ab initio*.

We may nevertheless, *at a much later stage in the ordering* of knowledge, in the way of a theory subject to the rules of inductive logic, posit an ultimate reality that is per se static while giving rise to changing appearances – or, oppositely, posit that nothing but change exists really. However, since the latter proposition is self-contradictory (being itself apparently something static to some degree), we would be wiser to aim for the former. Nevertheless, the latter must still be given serious consideration, for it has much going for it as a description of our world of experience.

Both change and stillness are immediately apparent in our experience. They are concrete, perceptual givens in the physical and mental fields of experience. This is a phenomenological truth, whatever conceptual theories we may at a later stage construct concerning them. When I look, listen, or otherwise physically sense or mentally project – I sometimes see, hear, etc. static things, sometimes see, hear, etc. events in motion, sometimes a bit of both kinds of phenomena, and never neither (except in intuitive experience, which is non-phenomenal).

Change is not a mere conceptual construct out of experience – it is itself experienced. Likewise, stillness is not a mere conceptual construct out of experience – it is itself experienced. Thus, though stillness and change are opposites, we ought not define either of them by negation of the other. They are both independent

percepts to begin with. At any moment, I may perceive some static things, some changing things, and some partly this and partly that. The concepts we have of change and stillness are later derivatives of those percepts. It is only on a conceptual level that change and stillness are correlated as each other's opposite.

This nuance between percept and concept has to be understood to avoid misleading analyses of the static or changing, which in any way reduce the one to the other or vice versa. Such analyses are theories – to be distinguished from the experiential facts of stillness and change. Such theories are not needed to prove the existence of stillness or change – their existence is already established by direct observation at every moment. The mere appearance of stillness and change is enough to justify the concepts of stillness and change, respectively.

It suffices that stillness *seems apparent* to categorically admit it exists; and it suffices that change *seems apparent* to categorically admit it exists. Their justification is pre-conceptual, phenomenological and prior to any epistemological or ontological hypotheses. This is true, even if at a more developed stage of knowledge, we hypothesize that apparently static phenomena are really underlain by change and so essentially illusory, or alternatively that apparently changing phenomena are really underlain by stillness and so essentially illusory.

We have to admit this position; otherwise, we would not be able to explain why or how things at all *appear* as static or as changing.

Thus, though the table I am looking at during this moment is an apparently quite static phenomenon, science tells me that beneath the surface, at more and more microscopic levels, this table is really composed of molecules, made up of vibrating atoms, themselves

reducible to subatomic particles in motion, etc. Even while accepting the scientific theory as correct, I must still admit that at the level of my perceptions, the table does appear static. The conceptual knowledge science gives me of the table *does not annul* (but only complements) my perceptual knowledge of it.

Similarly, though I may go on to claim that even more deeply, the changes postulated by science are themselves just some of the movements of a single, universal fabric of being – such ultimate monistic philosophy must not be construed to invalidate the observed fact of changing phenomena at the perceptual level or the conceived fact of change in scientific descriptions of what goes on beneath the surface of static or changing phenomena. Monism is a philosophy, a theoretical construct, intended to explain<sup>104</sup>, not erase, the facts of change.

Moreover, if through meditation we eventually arrive at a direct experience of the essential unity and rest of all things, such mystical experience could not be regarded as canceling lower level experiences of change and stillness, or theories about such experiences.

Note too that all the above comments can be repeated with regard to uniformity and variety, peace and conflict, eternity and temporality, and all such basic

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<sup>104</sup> For example, monism might explain the differences between matter, mind and soul by postulating different degrees or shapes of motion. Viewing the ultimate fabric of existence as resembling a sea – matter might be represented by big waves and currents, mind perhaps by little vibrations, and soul say by rotations. By such analogy, we can roughly imagine how these three “substances” might be quite different yet essentially the same. (This example is not intended to exclude the possibility of other, better models.)

dualities. At no level of existence or knowledge are the levels above, below or adjacent to be considered as eradicated; they all coexist. All this may seem somewhat paradoxical, but it is the only way to reconcile differences.

## 12. Impermanence and soul

*Drawn from Logical and Spiritual Reflections (2008-9), book 3, chapters 15-16, 20.*

### 1. Impermanence

*Man is like a breath; his days are as a passing shadow.*  
 (Ps. 144)

The transience<sup>105</sup> of worldly existence is rightly emphasized by Buddhism; but it is wrongly formulated when it is stated as “everything is transient” (or some similar expression), because “everything” formally includes the statement itself, implying it to be transient too, whereas the statement is intended as a law not subject to change – so there is self-contradiction. The contradiction is avoidable if we just qualify the statement, saying: “everything *in this world* is transient”, implying that beyond the domain of material and mental phenomena there is some sort of stability.

The existence of an underlying or transcendental constancy is admitted by Buddhists when they speak of the “original ground of being” or of our having a “Buddha nature” – but they are at the same time doctrinally committed to the idea of universal transience. The latter is a dogma many refuse to budge from, although when pushed to the wall some will admit

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*Anitya* in Sanskrit.

that there are “two truths” – the truth of transience in this world and the truth of permanence in the world beyond.

That is to say, whereas the world of matter and mind (known through sensory and mental perception) is indeed impermanent, the world of the spirit (known through intuitive consciousness) is free of change.

Consider for example a car. If we scratch the paintwork or change one of its wheels, is it another car or the same car? We would conventionally continue to regard it as “one and the same” car, but add that its paintwork was scratched or its wheel had changed. But if this is true, then if we successively changed all its parts, we would be calling a completely different car “the same” car, even though not one of its parts is still present at the end of the process!

Analysis of this sort shows that there is some absurdity in our naming material – or likewise, mental – objects as if they are constant – although they never are. The question then arises: where should we draw the line? How many changes are compatible with calling the car the “same” individual, and how many force us to call it a “different” individual? Any answer we might propose would obviously be quite arbitrary!

This insight was central to the Buddha’s doctrine that phenomenal objects are mere composites without an abiding essence. There is no “ghost” of a car underlying an apparent individual car, which stays on while the components of the car change (as they inevitably and invariably do). The same is true for any part of the car: e.g. a wheel is itself a mere composite of bits of metal and rubber. There is no concrete phenomenon we can point to and call “the car” or “the wheel”. The same can be said of mental objects, i.e. memories, imaginations, anticipations and dreams.

It follows that our naming of material and mental objects is a conventional act, which cannot sustain critical scrutiny. The individual object is *apparently* “the same” moment after moment, because we conceive a *similarity* between our perceptions at successive times. But such similarity is an abstract truth, made possible by our ability to compare perceptions and find some common measures between them. It is not a concrete truth – there is no phenomenal underlying unity. Thus, and in this sense, the appearance of sameness is an illusion and not a reality.

Note, however, that this argument is not entirely convincing. First, because it involves an extrapolation from an epistemological limitation (our inability to perceive an essence) to an ontological assumption (that there is no essence). This is presented as a deduction, whereas it is a mere hypothesis – and inductive logic still allows us to propose the counter-thesis that there is a unity of some sort, provided we adduce more favorable evidence and arguments in its support.

Second, we can point out that in the transition from one composition of the object to another (e.g. a car with an old wheel, then with a new wheel), there is some continuity in the way of *overlap* (i.e. some of the car parts seem unchanged). We could not change *all* the car parts *at once* and call the new construct “the same” car (i.e. the same individual car, even if the kind of car is the same); the past constituents would have to instantly disappear and be “replaced” by a new set of constituents – and even then (if we could prove this had indeed occurred) we would hesitate to call the two incarnations “the same” individual.

This is at least true for matter; that is to say, in our experience of matter we do not encounter complex things that instantly pop in or out of existence, or change into something completely different. This sort of wild

behavior is, however, experienced in dreams or daydreams – and the reason why is that in the mental domain we are free to *intend* any one thing to be “identical with” any other thing. Even so, even though mental scenarios are arbitrary, it does not follow that what we thus intend is really equal.

The next question to ask would be: are there or not *irreducible primaries*, i.e. phenomena (whether material or mental) that are not themselves composed of other phenomena? Some Buddhist philosophers (of the Abhidharma school) have insisted that there must be some initial building blocks (said in Sanskrit to have *svabhava*, “own-being” or “self-nature”<sup>106</sup>) from which all other things in the world are constructed; while others (mostly from the Mahayana school) have opted for the idea that there is no end to the subdivision of matter and mind into simpler constituents.

The former opinion may be compared to the atomism<sup>107</sup> of antiquity and early modern science, and the latter to

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<sup>106</sup> I find enervating the way many people keep piously repeating the expression “self-nature” as if it has some clear established meaning. It is far from clear-cut, and so cannot even be used as a logical yardstick the way some Buddhists use it.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Atom’ literally means ‘cannot be cut up further’; the word is here being used in a generic sense, not in the specifically material sense intended by Democritus or Dalton. The idea of atomism is that there are irreducible constituents of matter (and eventually, we could add, of mind), whose movements and combinations can be traced to explain all entities and states of the material (and analogously, the mental) world. If atoms had a beginning, they all came into being together; and if they ever have an end, they will all go together; so that, as of when and so long as the world exists, they are effectively unborn, unconditioned and indestructible.

more recent approaches in modern science, which keep going deeper in matter and finding no end to it.

I would like to state that contrary to common claims by its opponents so-called Aristotelian logic does not depend on belief in “essences” for its validity. The term is for a start ambiguous: does it refer to concrete particulars (i.e. irreducible primary phenomena), or to abstractions (i.e. conceived commensurability)? If by essences we mean abstractions, it is clear that logic would be unnecessary and impossible without them. But if we mean concrete prime constituents, the laws of thought are equally applicable whether they are affirmed or denied. They do not prejudice the result of infinite subdivision, but they do clarify some potentially absurd lines of thought.

For one, the infinite subdivision view seems nihilistic if taken to an extreme, and indeed some have taken it that far, inferring that literally nothing (or “emptiness”) is at the root of all being. But such an inference is not only paradoxical – it is not justified from the premises. For even if we forever keep finding smaller or simpler constituents, it does not follow that the constituents ever become non-existents. It is a fallacy, like the assumption that infinite divisibility of space ultimately implies subdivisions without extension, or that an infinity of zeros can add up to anything more than zero.

Also, those who claim that you can keep subdividing things, i.e. each phenomenon can be reduced to still finer phenomena ad infinitum, do not realize that this “you can” claim is fantasy and generalization. For, in

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This is postulated in support of the hypothesis that atoms, though possibly of different varieties, do not change qualitatively, or increase or decrease quantitatively, but merely move around.

truth, they do the subdivision *mentally*, and not physically; and they do it a *small number of times*, and not infinitely (which would surely take forever). Emptiness in this sense is not an experience, but at best a rational truth; and it is not even a deductive certainty, but a mere generalization. Thus, emptiness is at best an inductive truth.

To claim emptiness as a sure fact, one would have to be literally and demonstrably *omniscient*, knowing all of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology and everything else in advance of any empirical efforts. One cannot subdivide something if one does not know what to subdivide it into; for instance, to say that white light is a mix of various colors of light, one would need to have experimented with a prism.

Furthermore, emptiness cannot be claimed a one-off *experience*, because it is defined by negation as the absence of “essence” (or “self-nature”). Negation is a basic act of reason; it is not something ever directly experienced, not a positive phenomenon. Thus, to claim that what the Buddha experienced is precisely emptiness, it would be necessary to claim a positive character to emptiness; otherwise, it must be admitted his rational faculty was involved.

Another fallacy involved in this view is the idea that “relationships” are somehow more real than the things (or non-things) they are considered as relating. It is claimed that nothing exists on its own, but everything exists dependently on other things or on everything else (codependence or interdependence theory) – but the relations of causal dependence here referred to seem to be implied to have independent existence! Superficially, due to use of ‘solid’ words, the dependences of all things on each other seem to provide a support for their alleged emptiness – but if the same analysis is also applied to

those relational suppositions, everything is left hanging up without support.

Those who adopt this view do not realize that they are using the word “things” in a way that does not subsume “dependencies” – i.e. in a way not as wide-ranging as it seems. If we examine their outlook closely, we realize that by “things” they mean the concrete objects of experience, i.e. phenomena, while by the “relations” between things they mean abstractions introduced by conception. So ultimately their thesis is that concepts are more “real” than percepts! This is the very opposite of inductive logic, for which phenomenal data precedes and justifies any rational ordering and organization.

A more credible viewpoint, which reconciles the two said theses, is to assume some sort of monism – i.e. that all things are expressions of the same one thing. We need not regard that ultimate matrix of being as literally substantial, as did the alchemists of yore when they spoke of a *prima materia*. On a material level, the idea of an ‘ether’ (a cosmic fluid of some sort) has been shown untenable by the constancy of the speed of light; and the idea of ‘fields’ that replaced it is still rather abstract and needing of ontological clarification.

As for the stuff of mind, it might be assumed some kind of rarified matter, or vice versa, but that issue yet needs to be resolved. One problem in proposing this sort of equation is that we commonly believe that “mind” (i.e. the substance of mental objects, like memories, dreams, imaginations and anticipations) is more dependent on consciousness and its Subject than “matter” is.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Material objects seem more independent of their observers than do mental objects, since two or more persons may see the same material object (it is in the public domain) and when one leaves off watching it the other(s) continue to

In any case, some sort of ultimate unity of all phenomena has to be assumed. In this monist model (as against the pluralist and nihilist hypotheses), the apparent variety and variability of the phenomenal is but an “expression” of the ultimate One<sup>109</sup>. The phenomenal is the surface of being, while the One is its depth. Whatever the mode of existence of that One (be it conceived as spiritual or energetic), it remains constant even as it generates variegated phenomena.

If “all is indeed One”, then “all names are falsely divisive” and “all phenomena are interdependent” (or at least all depend on the same common source). Thus, monism ought to be acceptable to the Buddhist philosophers who have the views described above. It is also acceptable to their critics – since we can say that at the level of the One, names are falsely divisive and phenomena are co- or inter-dependent; but at the

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see it; whereas, a mental object is seen by only one person (it is in a private domain) and fails to exist if unseen by that person. While a material object is not apparently a product of any observer or nervous system, a mental object is considered as voluntarily produced by its observer or at least produced by the brain associated with that observer. Note however that in the case of mind, it is not accurate to say that consciousness affects its content – rather, the mental content is produced just prior to its being observed (although such production may necessitate earlier acts of deliberative consciousness). So the “subjectivity” involved is not extreme – there is a mental object somewhat apart from the Subject and his/her consciousness of it.

<sup>109</sup> Such monism is perhaps intended by the Buddhists in their concept of the *dharmakaya*, although if pressed they would likely insist on equating this original ground of being with *sunyata* (emptiness).

pluralist level of common phenomena, names are valuable and extreme dependence is misleading.<sup>110</sup>

Be it said in passing, the spiritual expression of belief in monism is equanimity.

## 2. Buddhist denial of the soul

The same analysis as above can be applied to humans, but only to some extent. If we identify ourselves with our bodily and mental experiences, we come to the conclusion that we are likewise composites empty of essence! Most Buddhists stop there and declare that therefore we have no self. But here they are committing an error, for it is wrong to limit our experience of humans to their material and mental manifestations<sup>111</sup>; we are evidently aware of more than that. Our spiritual experiences must also be taken into consideration – and in that case we must admit that we can become (by a mode of experience we may call apperception or intuition) aware of our “self” (or spirit or soul).

In truth, Buddhists agree with this viewpoint when they admit that we are potentially or ultimately all Buddhas<sup>112</sup> – this is effectively an admission of soul,

<sup>110</sup> This is more or less the Buddhist doctrine of Two Truths, anyway.

<sup>111</sup> As previously pointed out: in *Phenomenology*, chapter V, and in *Meditations*, chapter 12, the terms “self”, “consciousness” and “mind” are in Buddhism sometimes treated as equivalent, and yet sometimes used with slightly different senses. As a result of such vagueness, wrong theories are proposed and many inconsistencies remain invisible.

<sup>112</sup> I give you one example (though I have come across many). S. Suzuki writes: “So it is absolutely necessary for

although most would dogmatically refuse that inference. Some say pointblank that there is no soul; but others, prefer to be more cryptic, and say: “there is and is not; and there neither is nor is not”<sup>113</sup>. But logically, these two (or more) postures must be considered equivalent, as their intent is simply that it is wrong to claim that soul exists.

But let us insist – our bodies and minds are composites and impermanent, like cars or dreams, but we differ in that we have a relatively abiding self. (I say “relatively abiding” to stress that the individual soul need not be considered absolutely eternal, although the common

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everyone to believe in nothing. But I do not mean voidness... This is called Buddha nature, or Buddha himself” (p. 117.)

<sup>113</sup> To be fair, see Mu Soeng p. 125. According to that (excellent) commentator, the *anatman* doctrine was never intended as “a metaphysical statement” but as “a therapeutic device”. As he tells it: “The Buddha responded to the Brahmanical formulation of a permanent entity, the self or atman, with silence, without taking a position either for or against.” Logically, this would imply Buddhism to consider the issue of self to be merely *problematic*, neither affirming nor denying such a thing. However, in my own readings of Buddhist texts, I have more often than not read an assertoric *denial* of self, or a “both yes and no, and/or neither yes nor no” salad, rather than merely an avoidance of the issue of self. Another comment worth my making here: the idea of a self ought not to be identified with the Brahmanical idea of a *permanent* self; the latter is a more specific idea than the former, and denial of the latter does not logically entail denial of the former. I support the idea of an *impermanent* individual self, assigning permanence only to the universal self (i.e. the transcendent, or God). These (and many other) nuances should not be glossed over.

source of all spiritual substance – which many of us identify with God<sup>114</sup> – is necessarily absolutely eternal.)

By self (or spirit or soul), we mean *the Subject of consciousness* (i.e. the “person” experiencing, cognizing, perceiving, conceiving, knowing, etc.) and *the Agent of volition and valuation* (i.e. the “person” who wishes, wills, values, etc.). Note well this definition, which is often ignored by those who deny the self’s existence.

A machine, computer or robot has no self – we (humans, and at least higher animals) evidently do: we all well know that we do. This self that we know is not our ego (a collection of aspects of our body and mind), though most of us do tend to confuse our self with our ego.

The self we know is manifest in our every act of cognition, volition or valuation, as the one engaged in that act. Although it is non-phenomenal, we are quite able to be aware of it. Although non-phenomenal, the self relates to phenomena (to those of its own body and mind, as well as to those further afield) either as their witness (i.e. through cognition), or by being affected by them or (when cognizing them) influenced by them, or by affecting them (through volition). But, though thus related to phenomena to various degrees, it is not identical with them and not to be identified with them.

The Buddhist denial of self is presented as empirical: one’s own bodily and mental experience is carefully examined, and nothing but passing phenomena are observed in it. But my contention is that such analysis is based on incomplete data – it does not take into account the intuitive self-awareness of the Subject and Agent. The self is willfully ignored in the way of a prejudice,

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See reasons for this in my *Meditations*, chapter 8.

rather than denied as a result of dispassionate observation. The non-self is not here a conclusion, but a premise – a dogma, an ideology.

Moreover, it must be stressed that the negation of any term (whether the term ‘self’ or any other) cannot logically be purely empirical. We never perceive a negative, we only search for and fail to perceive the corresponding positive, and thence *inductively* ‘infer’ that the thing negated is absent. This conclusion is not necessarily final – it is a hypothesis that may be later overturned if new data is encountered that belies it, or even if an alternative hypothesis is found more frequently supported by the evidence.

Thus, the non-self cannot be – as Buddhism presents it – a purely empirical product of deep meditation; according to logic, its negativity makes it necessarily a *rational* construct. It is therefore not an absolute truth of any sort – but a mere generalization from “I diligently searched, but did not so far find a self” to “no self was there to be found”. It is not perceptual, but *conceptual* – it is a thesis like any other open to doubt and debate, and requiring proof (in the inductive sense, at least). If no inconsistency is found in its counter-thesis, the idea of a self may also legitimately be upheld.

Thus, even though we may admit that the body and mind are devoid of essence(s), we can still claim that there is a soul. The soul is not meant to be the essence of the phenomena of body and mind, but a distinct non-phenomenal entity housed in, intersecting or housing<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> We tend to view the soul as a small thing, something somewhere in the body or at best coextensive with it. But we should at least conceive the possibility of the opposite idea – viz. that the soul is enormous in comparison with the body, i.e. that the body is a small mark within the soul or a minor

these phenomena in some way. Body and mind merely constitute the soul's mundane playground, i.e. a particular domain of the world over which that individual soul<sup>116</sup> has special powers of consciousness and volition.

This view agrees with the proponents of emptiness at least in the insight that the self is not to be confused with body and mind. Also, the fact that the soul is non-phenomenal, i.e. neither a material nor a mental entity, does not logically exclude that it too be "empty" of essence, of course. But, whereas they go on to claim that the self does not exist, we would insist that even if (or even though) the individual soul is empty, it evidently exists – just as body and mind evidently exist whatever we say about them.<sup>117</sup>

It is in any case patently absurd to say or imply, as the Buddhists do, that *a non-existent* can think that it exists and (upon enlightenment) realize that it does not exist! A non-existent cannot think or realize anything; it is not an entity or a thing – it is nothing at all, it is not. An existent, on the other hand, can well (as these existing Buddhists do) think that it does not exist and other such nonsense! There is no logic in the no-self viewpoint.

The non-self idea may be viewed as supportive of materialism (in a large sense of the term, which includes

appendage to it. Our view of their relative size is, in truth, a function of the relative importance we attach to them, i.e. how frequently we focus our interest on the one or the other.

<sup>116</sup> Or individuated soul. I say this to stress that the individual soul may be considered as artificial subdivision of the universal soul (or God, in Judaic terms).

<sup>117</sup> In my view, whatever even just but appears to exist does indeed exist (if only in the way of appearance). Is it real or illusory, though? Those characterizations are open to discussion, and depend on a great many logical factors.

mental phenomena as within the domain of matter). That is why many people today find it appealing: eager to reject the demands and constraints of the ethics of monotheistic religion, yet wishing to retain or introduce some spirituality in their lives, they embrace soul denial. All this is not intended to deny the crucial importance of *self-effacement* in meditation and more broadly in the course of spiritual development. I would certainly agree with Buddhist teaching that the self at some stage becomes an impediment to enlightenment and must be effectively forgotten to contemplate things as they are.<sup>118</sup>

But to my mind, the non-self thesis need not be taken literally. I think Buddhists formulated it as an *upaya*, a skillful means<sup>119</sup>, to facilitate forgetting the self. It is easier to forget what one believes does not exist, than to forget what one believes does exist. As far as I see (at my present stage of development), though disbelief in the self has some practical advantages, there is insufficient theoretical justification for such a doctrine.

We colloquially say that our mind is “empty” when our mind-space is for a while without feelings or thoughts, as occasionally happens quite naturally. In that state of mind, we are generally less distracted, and can observe whatever presents itself to us without interfering in the presentation. Sometimes, that commonplace empty-mindedness is experienced rather as a sort of momentary

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<sup>118</sup> Judaism agrees with this epistemological and ethical posture, as evidenced for instance by this statement of the Baal Shem Tov: “Before you can find God, you must lose yourself”. (From *A Treasury of Jewish Quotations*.)

<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, Buddhism is not interested in descriptive philosophy; what concerns it is to liberate us spiritually. If an idea is effective as a means to that end, it is taught.

detachment or even alienation from the world around us, as when our eyes become unfocused and just stare out without seeing anything.

The Buddhist sense of the word emptiness is of course much more complex than that, though not totally unrelated. When applied objectively, to things beyond or within the mind, it signifies that they are viewed without recourse to superimposed categories or hypotheses. Applied subjectively, the implication of the term is that the self is an illusion of consciousness, i.e. that our apperception of a cognizing soul is likewise a merely superimposed idea.

But is this Buddhist claim to be taken on faith, or do they manage to prove it incontrovertibly in any way? The mere fact that this doctrine was once proclaimed, and is claimed again by many authorities throughout the centuries, does not in itself make it a certain truth. We must be permitted to doubt it, and ask questions about it, and raise objections to it – without being accused of being heretics or morons.

### **3. The laws of thought in meditation**

The three laws of thought are commonly considered by many current commentators<sup>120</sup> to be (at best) only relevant to rational discourse, and not relevant at all or even antithetical to meditation and all the more so to its finale of enlightenment. Nothing could be further from the truth, as will now be explicated.

The laws of thought are principally ‘moral’ imperatives to the thinker, enjoining him or her to have certain cognitive attitudes in all processes of thought. They call

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Judging by Internet postings and debate on this topic.

upon the thinker to make an effort, so as to guarantee maximum efficiency and accuracy of his or her thoughts. The ‘metaphysical’ aspect of the laws of thought is a substratum and outcome of this practical aspect.<sup>121</sup>

1. **The law of identity** is a general stance of ‘realism’.

In *discursive thought*, this means: to face facts; to observe and think about them; to admit the factuality of appearances as such and that of logical arguments relating to them; to accept the way things are (or at least the way they seem to be for now), that things are as they are, i.e. whatever they happen to be; and so on.

Clearly, these same cognitive virtues are equally applicable to *meditation practice*, which requires **awareness**, receptivity and lucidity. The antitheses of these attitudes are evasiveness, prejudice and obscurantism, resulting in “sloth and torpor”<sup>122</sup>.

At the apogee of meditation, in the *enlightenment* experience, this is expressed as (reportedly) consciousness of the “thus-ness” (or “such-ness”) of “ultimate reality”.

2. **The law of non-contradiction** is a general stance of ‘coherence’ (which is an aspect of ‘realism’).

In *discursive thought*, this means: while giving initial credence to all appearances taken singly, not to accept two conflicting appearances as both true (or real), but to place one or both of them in the category of falsehood (or illusion); to seek to

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<sup>121</sup> It could also be said that the two aspects are ‘co-emergent’, mutually significant and equally important. But here I wish to stress the psychological side of the issue.

<sup>122</sup> See Kamalashila, p. 253.

resolve or transcend all apparent contradictions; to pursue consistency in one's concepts and theories; to reject inconsistent ideas as absurd and self-contradictions as untenable nonsense; and so on.

Clearly, these same cognitive virtues are equally applicable to *meditation practice*, which requires **harmony**, balance and peace of mind. The antitheses of these attitudes are conflict, confusion and neurosis (or madness), resulting in “restlessness and anxiety”<sup>123</sup>.

At the peak of meditation, in the *enlightenment* experience, this is expressed as (reportedly) the “one-ness” (monism or monotheism) of “ultimate reality”.

- 3. **The law of the excluded middle** is a general stance of ‘curiosity’ (which is also an aspect of ‘realism’).

In *discursive thought*, this means: engaging in research and study, so as to fill gaps in one's knowledge and extend its frontier; engaging in speculation and theorizing, but always under the supervision and guidance of rationality; avoiding fanciful escapes from reality, distorting facts and lying to oneself and/or others; accepting the need to eventually make definite choices and firm decisions; and so on.

Clearly, these same cognitive virtues are equally applicable to *meditation practice*, which requires **clarity**, judgment and understanding. The antitheses of these attitudes are ignorance, uncertainty and delusion, resulting in “doubt and indecision”<sup>124</sup>.

<sup>123</sup> See Kamalashila, p. 249.

<sup>124</sup> See Kamalashila, p. 258.

At the pinnacle of meditation, in the *enlightenment* experience, this is expressed as (reportedly) the “omniscience” of “ultimate reality”.

Thus, I submit, rather than abandon the laws of thought when we step up from ordinary thinking to meditation, and from that to enlightenment, we should stick to them, while allowing that they are expressed somewhat differently at each spiritual stage. Whereas in discursive thought awareness is expressed by intellectual activity, in meditation the approach is gentler and subtler, and in enlightenment we attain pure contemplation.

When such final realization is reached<sup>125</sup>, the laws of thought are not breached, but made most evident. “Thus-ness” is the essence of existence; it is the deepest stratum of identity, not an absence of all identity. “One-ness” is not coexistence or merging of opposites, but where all oppositions are dissolved or transcended. “Omniscience” is not in denial of ordinary experience and knowledge, but their fullest expression and understanding. What in lower planes of being and knowing seems obscure, divergent and uncertain, becomes perfect at the highest level.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> I submit, on the basis of my own limited experience, but also out of logical expectation of consistency between all levels of being. I think many people more knowledgeable than me would agree with the descriptions here given of the higher realms.

<sup>126</sup> Buddhist, and especially Mahayana, philosophers often stress that nirvana (the common ground of all being) and samsara (the multiplicity of changing appearances) are ultimately one and the same. Even while admitting this, we must remain aware of their apparent difference. The whole point of the philosophical idea of monism (“nirvana”) is of course to resolve the contradictions and gaps inherent in the experience of plurality (“samsara”). At the same time, the

Those teachers or commentators who claim that the laws of thought are abrogated once we transcend ordinary discourse are simply misinterpreting their experiences. Either their experience is not true “realization”, or their particular interpretation of their realization experience is just an erroneous afterthought that should not be viewed as part of the experience itself.

Instead of the laws of identity, non-contradiction and exclusion of any middle, they propose *a law of non-identity, a law of contradiction, and a law of the included middles!* According to them, the ultimate reality is that nothing has an identity, all contradictories coexist quite harmoniously, and there may be other alternatives besides a thing and its negation!

They adduce as proofs the Buddhist principles of non-selfhood, impermanence and interdependence.

But they cannot claim that something has no “nature” whatsoever, for then what is that “something” that they are talking about? If it is truly non-existent, why and how are we at all discussing it and who are we? Surely these same people admit the existence of an “ultimate reality” of some sort – if only a single, infinite, universal substratum<sup>127</sup>. They call it “void” or “empty”, but surely

one-ness of nirvana is in a sort of conflict with the multiplicity of samsara. We must somehow both admit and ignore this tension. In truth, all this remains an unsolved problem at some level.

<sup>127</sup> The “great self” or “ocean of permanence”, to use the words of Dogen (p. 267). Note that Dogen is not here saying there is no such thing, but is stressing that we do not – as some people claim – *automatically* all return there after death, but rather are subject to various rebirths according to our respective karmas; he is implying that to get there is hard-won realization, not something given *gratis* to all comers). Some identify this underlying ultimate reality with the “*Deus sive*

such a negation is not logically tenable without the admission that something positive is being negated; a negation can never be a primary given.

Similarly, we might argue, “impermanence” means the impermanence *of* something and “interdependence” means the interdependence *of* two or more things. They cannot claim infinite impermanence, without admitting the extended existence in time of something however temporary; and they cannot claim a universal interdependence, without admitting causal connections between actual facts.

There is an unfortunate tendency here to use words without paying attention to their relational implications. Another example of this practice is to speak of “consciousness” (or perception or thought or some such cognitive act), without admitting that this implies consciousness *of* something (called an object) *by* something (called the Subject).

This is done deliberately, to conform with the ideological prejudice that there is no cognizing self and nothing to cognize. Similarly, so as not to have to mention the Agent willing an action, volition is concealed and the action is made to appear spontaneous or mechanical. They refuse to admit that *someone* is suffering, thinking, meditating or becoming enlightened.

Another claim often made is that our common experience of the world is like a dream compared to

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*Natura*” of Baruch Spinoza (Holland, 1632-77). But I hasten to add that I do not subscribe to Spinoza’s equation of God and Nature, which implies that God is like Nature subject to determinism. For me, as in normative Judaism, God is the free, volitional creator of Nature. He underlies and includes it. It is a mere product His and but a tiny part or aspect of Him.

ultimate reality. The implication being that the laws of thought are not obeyed in a dream. But in truth, even in a dream, though images and sound come and go and seem to intertwine, actually there is no contradiction if we observe carefully. As for the difference between dream and awake experience, it is not strictly a contradiction since they are experienced as distinct domains of being.

*Contradiction is not even thinkable, except in words (or intentions).* We cannot even *actually* imagine a contradiction, in the sense defined by Aristotle (is and is not at once in every respect). We can only *say (or vaguely believe)* there is one. We of course commonly encounter apparent contradiction, but that does not prove that contradiction exists in fact. It is an illusion, a conflict between verbal interpretations or their non-verbal equivalents.

We formulate theories; they yield contradictions; we correct the theories so that they no longer yield these contradictions. We tailor our rational constructs to experience. We do not infer contradiction to exist from contradictions in our knowledge. We question and fix our knowledge, rather than impose our beliefs on reality. That is sanity, mental health. That is the way knowledge progresses, through this dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis.

## 13. Epistemological status

*Drawn from Logical and Spiritual Reflections (2008-9), book 3, chapters 17-19 and addendum 2.*

### 1. The status of sense perceptions

I would like here to explore some more aspects of the controversy between Materialism and Mentalism<sup>128</sup>. Note that both views are here taken to acknowledge mental phenomena: the mentalist (or mind-only) view accepts mental phenomena to the exclusion of material ones, whereas the materialist view (as here understood<sup>129</sup>) accepts material phenomena without excluding mental ones from the world (though it circumscribes their occurrence in “minds” like ours).

Is sense perception objective (and therefore valid) or subjective (and therefore invalid)? That is, is the world we perceive apparently through our sense organs

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<sup>128</sup> See also earlier comments of mine on this issue, in *Future Logic* (chapters 60-62), *Buddhist Illogic* (chapters 4 and 5), *Phenomenology* (chapters I-IV), *Ruminations* (chapter 2, Sections 16 and 17), and *Meditations* (chapter 32).

<sup>129</sup> I simply ignore the “matter-only” hypothesis, known as Behaviorism in modern philosophy and psychology, because that hypothesis is clearly unscientific, since it deliberately ignores all mental phenomena, treating them as non-existent (and not merely as rarified forms of matter). Mental phenomena are phenomenological givens, and cannot be just waved-off as irrelevant. That we cannot, to date, materially detect and measure them does not justify a materialist thesis, since this would constitute a circular argument.

material, or is it as mental as the phenomena we project in our imaginations? Most people, including most scientists and philosophers, accept things as they seem at the outset, and opt for the materialist thesis. But some philosophers, like George Berkeley in the West or the Yogacara School in the East, would argue that this ‘common-sense’ conclusion is rushed, and prefer the mentalist alternative.

The latter suggest that the whole notion of sense-organs is flawed, because if we suppose that there is a cognizing entity enclosed in a physical body with organs of sensation, through which information of other physical bodies beyond is obtained, the information actually cognized by the subject-entity is not the *physical objects* supposedly in contact with the sensory receptors, but *mental products* of such supposed objects at the other extremity of the process of sensation, i.e. directly opposite the one cognizing.

If, then, what we actually perceive are not physical objects but assumed mental products of them – it follows that all our actual objects of perception are all mental and none are material. That is, even our apparent body (including the sense organs it seems to contain) is effectively a mere mental phenomenon; and there is also no reason to suppose that the material world apparently beyond them is anything but mental.

That is, concluding this line of argument, the very distinction between mental and material must be abandoned as a silly idea, and only mental objects admitted as real. Phenomena ordinarily classed as material are just as mental as imaginings (though perhaps less readily controlled). Their appearance is real enough, but their materiality is illusory. Thus, materialism is a naïve philosophy, and mentalism is the correct doctrine.

I have in the past always argued that this skeptical argument is logically *self-contradictory*, because it starts with an assumption that the body and its sense organs exist in a material sense, and ends with the conclusion that there are no such material body and sense organs. A conclusion cannot contradict the premise(s) it is drawn from – so this argument must itself be logically flawed.

But now it occurs to me that this counter-argument of mine might be unfair, and I wish to review it. It occurs to me that it is formally acceptable for a conclusion to contradict its premise(s) – this is just what (single) paradoxical propositions mean. A proposition of the form “If P, then not P” is logically quite legitimate (if not accompanied by a second proposition of the form “If not P, then P”, for in such case we have an insoluble double paradox, i.e. a contradiction). The logical conclusion of “If P, then not P” (alone<sup>130</sup>) is the categorical proposition “Not P”.

In the case under scrutiny, the premise P is “there is a material body with sense organs” and the conclusion NotP is “there is no such thing” – and such inference is quite thinkable, quite legitimate according to the laws of thought. That is, rather than view the argument presented by the skeptics as self-defeating, we might suggest that they have shown materialism to be inherently paradoxical and thus self-contradictory, and rightly concluded mentalism to be the only internally consistent thesis of the two!

However, I have seen through this line of argument from the start, when I contended, in my *Future Logic* (chapter 62), that the solution to this conundrum was to deny the idea that what we perceive, when we seem to perceive

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<sup>130</sup>

I.e. only in conjunction with “If not P, not-then P”.

material objects through the senses, are mental images of such material objects. I believe this is the error of conception regarding the nature of sense perception, which is logically bound to result in skepticism. John Locke made this error, and David Hume was quick to spot it (though he could not correct it).<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Incidentally, in the Western philosophy of the Enlightenment (not to confuse this label with the Buddhist sense of ultimate knowledge, of course), the word “sensation” was used too vaguely. No great distinction was made between touch, smell and taste sensations, on the one hand, and visual and auditory sensations, on the other.

[Note that we linguistically tend to relate the touch, smell and taste senses. Thus, in English, ‘feeling’ may refer to touch-sensations (including hot and cold tastes), sensations of bodily functions (digestive, sexual, etc.), visceral sentiments (in body, of mental origin), or vaguely mental emotions; and ‘sensing’ may refer to physical sensations, or vague mental suspicions. Also, in French, the word ‘sentir’ corresponds not only to the words ‘to feel’ and ‘to sense’, but also to ‘to smell’ (whence the English word ‘scent’).]

Yet, the three former sensations are far more easily misinterpreted than the latter two. E.g. it is far more difficult for us humans to identify someone based on touch, smell or taste sensations, than on visual or auditory sensations. By this I mean that touch sensations (etc.) usually tell us of a condition *of our own body caused by some other body external to it*, whereas sights and sounds are *aspects of the external object itself* that we (the Subject) somehow perceive. At least, this is the way things seem to us at first sight. We must still, of course, move from such Naïve Realism to a more Subtle Realism. In any case, each mode of sensation has its value, and they should not all be lumped together.

By the way, another vague term in this school has been “ideas”. This term tends to have been used indiscriminately, sometimes applied to perceptual memories, or again to visual or auditory projections, and sometimes applied to conceptual

Locke was well intentioned, intent on justifying common sense; but his scenario was imperfectly conceived, and sure to lead to Berkeley's radical conclusion. However, there is a logical way out of the difficulty – and that is to conceive the sense organs as somehow allowing us to perceive the material objects *themselves*, or (more precisely) at least certain aspects of them, rather than only some mental products of them. If you reflect, you will realize that this is what we ordinarily assume we are doing when we perceive the world seemingly around us.

This is of course a hard scenario to explain, but it provides a possible justification for materialism (a self-consistent, non-naïve version), and thus an effective defense against the skeptical conclusion of mentalism. In this manner, the paradox inherent in naïve materialism is not ignored or denied, and yet the mentalist conclusion is not drawn from it, because a third thesis is proposed.

This third thesis is that sensation, rather than implying indirect perception, makes possible **direct perception** (*perhaps by producing some sort of physical structure in the brain serving as a passageway for the Subject's consciousness to get in direct contact with the object sensed*). This thesis is not, by its mere formulation, definitively proved, note well; but at least it serves to put the mentalist doctrine in doubt.

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constructs, whether or not verbal. Yet, these different mental ‘entities’ have very different significances in the formation of knowledge. Clearly, relatively empirical data has more weight than more abstract productions. Making distinctions between different sorts of “sensations” and “ideas” is very important if we want to accurately evaluate the constituents of knowledge.

We are in this manner provided with two competing hypotheses, both of which seemingly equally account for experience; and the question of materiality versus mentality of the objects of certain perceptions is thus reopened. The issue is turned from a deductive one (favoring mentalism) to an inductive one (in which both doctrines are at least equally conceivable).

I thereafter posit further argumentation to show the reasonableness of the common sense (materialist) view. Since the matter-mind distinction is itself based on that view, it cannot be used by mentalists to declare all objects mental rather than material. Given their view, no such distinction would arise in the first place, and we would have no understanding of the different intentions of these two words.

Moreover, I have suggested that the distinction might be phenomenologically explicable, by saying that mental phenomena are merely visual and/or auditory, but lack other phenomenal qualities. Mental phenomena correspond to those experienced through sight and hearing, whereas touch, smell and taste sensations seem to have no equivalent forms in the mind. Our memories can recognize them, but they seemingly cannot reproduce them.

In other words, we perhaps recognize materiality by virtue of touch<sup>132</sup>, smell and taste sensations, granting that the mental domain lacks these specific phenomenal

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<sup>132</sup> Especially touch. Note how one sense of the term ‘substantiality’ is the hardness of a material object in reaction to touch. Solids are most substantial, resisting all pressure. By contrast, in view of their yielding, liquids are somewhat less substantial, and gases least of all. But all states of matter are also known to some extent through other sensations, like heat and cold, etc.

modalities. Visual and auditory phenomena are ambiguous, i.e. they might be material or mental; but (I tentatively suggest) the other modalities are distinctively material.

An explanation for this may be that the senses of touch, smell and taste are biologically more basic, while those of sight and hearing occur further up the evolutionary scale. The former are more qualitative and pleasure-pain related, applicable to any sentient being, whereas the latter are more spatial and temporal, implying a more complex form of life.

It is also important to note that mentalists consider consciousness of mental objects as needing less explanation than consciousness of material objects. To them, knowledge through the senses is hard to explain, in view of the distance of the knowing subject from such objects; whereas, mental objects are more knowable because closer to us. Or if it is not an issue of distance to them, perhaps they consider that the knower is of the same substance as mental objects.

But we must realize that consciousness of mental objects is just as marvelous, mysterious and miraculous as consciousness of physical objects.

To regard mental objects as of the same stuff as the knowing self (because we colloquially lump these things together as constituents of the ‘mind’ or psyche) is an error. Mental objects like memories, imaginations or ideas are not themselves conscious: they are always objects, never subjects of consciousness; therefore they cannot be essentially equated to the soul that knows them.

As for distance: on what basis are physical objects regarded as further afield than mental objects? Such spatial considerations are only possible if we locate the soul in a continuum including mental and material

objects. But in truth, we do not strictly believe in a continuum common to both mental and material objects, although some mental projections (hallucinations) do sometimes seem to inhabit the same space as physical things. Furthermore, we do not know the exact ‘place’ of the soul: is it in the heart or in the brain or coterminous with the body or outside it – or is it in some other dimension of being altogether?

*It should be added that consciousness of oneself, i.e. the intuition of self by self, is essentially no different from these two kinds of consciousness: only the objects differ in the three cases. That is, whether the objects are mental, material or spiritual in ‘substance’, consciousness is still one and the same sort of special relation. The same reflection also applies to eventual ‘transcendental’ consciousness, i.e. consciousness of God or of the Ultimate Ground of Being – this is still consciousness. Whatever the kind of object involved, consciousness remains marvelous, mysterious and miraculous.*

*Thus, asserting mentalism instead of materialism is not as significant for the theory of knowledge as might at first sight seem. The apparent gain in credibility in such change of paradigm dissolves once we pay attention to the question: but what is consciousness?*

## 2. The status of dreams and daydreams

Do we logically need to have some absolute frame of reference to compare all others to, in order to claim that some frame of reference is relative? If that were the case, Einstein’s theory on the relativity of space-time would be unthinkable. He could not claim all frameworks are relative. But he is not making such a claim by *deduction* from some privileged vantage point of his. What he is saying, rather, is that (because of the

same measurement of the velocity of light in all directions) we cannot establish an absolute framework, and so we are condemned to viewing every framework we use as relative. This is an *inductive* argument, involving generalization from existing empirical knowledge.

It remains conceivable that, at some future time, scientists discover some other physical means to establish an absolute frame of reference. The same reasoning can be applied to Heisenberg's principle concerning the impossibility of identifying precisely and simultaneously the position and momentum of an elementary particle. This too is a theoretical principle built on practical considerations. It is based on a generalization of negation from "is not found" to "cannot be found" – but it remains conceivable, however remotely, that such a rule be abrogated in the future, if we find some other way to make the measurements required.

These examples within physical science can help us to inform an issue within metaphysics. Can we logically assert as do some philosophers that "everything is illusory" (or "awake experience is only a dream" or other similar skeptical statements)? At first sight, a statement like "everything is illusory" is self-contradictory, and therefore definitively false, since "everything" formally must include the statement itself, which is thereby declared illusory. However, let us try and approach the issue in less deductive terms, and view the statement as a product of induction.

We can call an experience a dream because we have some other experience to refer to, which we consider non-dreamy. Usually, we realize *after* we wake up: "Oh, I was only dreaming". Exceptionally, it happens that we become aware *during* a dream that we are dreaming, and we can even force ourselves to awaken from within the

dream (I have certainly experienced this several times). In either case, we characterize our asleep experience as “dream” only because we have memory of an alternative, awake experience. The very concept of a dream would seem to rely on such comparison.

Or does it? In comparing awake and asleep experience, we postulate that the former is more real than the latter, and thereby classify the former as “real” and the latter as “illusory”. But what is the basis of such discrimination? Approaching the issue without prejudice, we might argue that (to begin with, at least) the two sets of experience are on equal footing (in terms of the reality vs. illusion distinction), i.e. that there is no reason to give precedence to the one over the other. Phenomenologically, they are of equal value, or status. We cannot tell which is more real or more illusory than the other, and therefore must conclude that both are equally unsure.

A good argument in favor of this view is the observation that most dreams seem credible enough to us while we are having them. This just goes to show *our native credulity*, how easily we tend to believe experiences. Seeing how foolishly credulous we are while asleep, we may well wonder whether our credulity while awake is just as silly, and get to think that our apparent life is perhaps a dream too.

This is perhaps the intended meaning of statements like “all is illusion” – they suggest our incapacity to find some absolute frame of reference we can label “reality”. But the reply to such objection would be the following. Contrary to what some philosophers claim, we do not in fact, in practice, label some parts of experience “reality” and relegate others to the status of “illusion” with certainty and finality. Such judgments are not absolute, but open to change using inductive reasoning.

The basic principle of induction is that every appearance is to be regarded as ‘reality’ *until and unless*, i.e. until if ever, conflicts between certain appearances, or between certain appearances and logical considerations, force us to relegate the appearance concerned to the status of ‘illusion’.

We have no way to tell the difference between reality and illusion at first sight. We do not dish out the labels of reality or illusion from some privileged, neutral standpoint, but start with the assumption that everything we (seem to) experience is real, and only refer to some such experiences as illusory in the way of a last resort. And even then, later evidence or reasoning may make us change our minds, and decide that what seemed illusory was real and what seemed real was illusory.

The distinction between these two characterizations of appearance is thus essentially a holistic, hypothetical conclusion, rather than a point-blank premise. The more data we take into consideration in forming such judgments, the more certain they become. The initial assumption is that an appearance is real. But the initial credibility is still conditional, in that it has to be confirmed and never infirmed thenceforth.

This is obvious, because all we have to build our knowledge on are our experiences (physical, mental or non-phenomenal) and our rational faculty (for sorting out the experiences). We have givens and a method, but we still have to work our way to certainty, through a long, largely inductive process.

At first (naïvely), appearance, existence and reality are all one and the same to us. Gradually (with increased subtlety), we distinguish appearances as existents that have been cognized, and realities as appearances that have stood the test of time with regard to consistency with other experiences and with logical issues. Illusions are appearances that have failed in some test or other.

Comparison and contrast are involved in distinguishing awake and dream experiences. Because the former seem more solid and regular than the latter, we label the former “real life” and the latter “dream”. Both sets of experience have to be considered before we can make this classification, and it is such perceived characteristics *apparent within them* that lead us to this rational judgment. Thus, the way remains open for further evaluation at some future time – for example, if we encounter some third corpus of experience that seems still more real than the previous two.

This is the claim of mysticism – that there exists yet a higher reality, relative to which (when we reach it through prophesy, meditation or other means) ordinary experience seems but like a mere dream (note the language of analogy). It is in that context that it becomes perfectly legitimate to say: “all is illusion”, meaning more precisely “all *that is in ordinary experience* is illusory”, i.e. in comparison to all that is in extraordinary experience. The proposition is logically self-consistent, because it is not as general in intent as it seems to be in its brief verbal formulation.

Of course, according to inductive logic, if someone had *only* the experience we call dreaming, he would have to regard that experience as reality. Likewise, someone who has never had a mystical experience is duty-bound to assume that his ordinary awake experience is reality.

It follows that only someone who has personally experienced some third, radically different, experiential content may legitimately claim that our ordinary experience is akin to a dream. Someone who thereafter repeats the same claim *without* having himself had the corresponding extraordinary experience is just expressing his (religious) faith. The epistemological status of such faith is not nil, but it is not equivalent to that involved in personal experience. It is a tentative

belief, an act of hope (or fear), based indirectly on someone else's *reported* experience – but not a belief based directly on one's own experience.

Note that even without referring to any mystical experience, it is not inaccurate to say that most of our awake experience is tantamount to dreaming. For what is dreaming while asleep? A series of mental projections; the invention of fanciful scenarios. And in truth, this is just what most of us pass most of our time doing while awake: we project mental images or sounds, viewing data either directly drawn from our memory banks or indirectly derived by reshuffling such memories. So we can rightly be said to be dreaming, even if we call it daydreaming.

In the last analysis, the only times we are *not* dreaming are those rare moments when we are actually fully absorbed in *the here and now* of direct experience!

However, according to those who claim to have had mystical experience of some transcendental reality, even this 'here and now' (made up of material and/or mental phenomena) ought to be regarded as dreaming. The latter statement is as radically metaphysical or transcendental as it can be, postulating all phenomenal experience to be dreamlike. In this view, dreams asleep are phantasms within a larger dream, and awake experience is also part of that larger dream.

People naively point to their apparently physical body in support of their claim to material reality, but so doing they fail to consider that when they dream while asleep they are usually represented in their dream by a mental image of a body. If this imaginary body seems credible to them while dreaming asleep, why might the apparently physical body experienced while awake not likewise wrongly seem credible?

Materiality, and its distinction from mentality, must ultimately be understood as a conceptual hypothesis, which we may philosophically adopt because it orders our world of experience (whatever its nature or status) in an intelligent and consistent manner. It is not an axiom, an ontological primary, but an organizing principle open to doubt, which we commonly favor because of its ongoing intellectual and practical utility and success.

Addendum (2010), concerning dreams. How do **the contents of our dreams** arise? Most people regard that dreams are made up of re-churned memories of sensations, feelings, sounds, images and verbal thoughts, perhaps with a subconscious creative interference at the time of dreaming. In other words, the contents of dreams are partly dished out more or less fortuitously by the brain, and at the same time partly shaped by the dreamer through a half-asleep effort of his will. I do not find this traditional explanation entirely convincing. It is of course largely true, but I think that it does not suffice to explain the complexity of dreams.

Looking at my own dreams, at the variety and complexity of the actors and scenarios that appear in them, I am perplexed by the fact that they seem far more imaginative than anything I am able to produce when awake. My speculation is that there must be *some additional external input* – by telepathy. During sleep, I believe, we intertwine our thoughts with those of other people.

### 3. The status of conceptions

The **concept** of some thing(s), call it X, is *the sum total of all observations, beliefs, thoughts, inductively or*

*deductively proven items of knowledge, opinions, imaginations, we (as individuals or collectively) have accumulated across time relative to the thing(s) concerned – call these cognitive events or intentions: A, B, C, D, etc.* Note well that the tag “X” refers to the objects X, intended by the concept of X, not to the mental apparatus or idea through which we know or think we know those objects.

Although we colloquially say that X “contains” A, B, C, D..., a concept is not to be thought of as a vessel containing a number of relevant mental entities, like a basket containing apples and oranges. It is best thought of as a collection of arrows pointing to various perceived phenomena, objects of intuitions, and related abstractions, which all together influence our overall idea of X. Our concept of X (an individual or kind) is our collection of beliefs about it.

The concept of X should not be thought of as equal specifically to its definition (as Kantians do), and still less to the name “X” (as Nominalists do). The name is just a physical or at least mental tag or label, allowing us to more easily focus on the concept, or more precisely on its contents (i.e. the objects intended by it). As for the definition, it is not the whole of X, but consists of some *exclusive and universal characteristic(s)* of X (say, A) among others (viz. B, C, D, etc., which may also be distinctive and always present, or not). One aspect is selected as defining, because it is helpful for complex thinking processes to do so. Definition is thus something both empirical and rational.

The definition “X is A” is therefore not a tautology, but holds information. Two propositions are involved in it: the predication that “X is A” and the claim that “A is the definition of X”. The latter is an *additional* proposition; it implies the former, but not vice versa. We may know that X is A, while not yet thinking or while wrongly

thinking that A is the best definition of X. Our idea of X would be equal to A if all we knew or thought about X was A; this is clearly very unlikely a scenario, though such paucity of information is theoretically conceivable. In practice, our idea of X includes much more, viz. B, C, D, etc.

We do not get the concept of man through the definition “rational animal”, but through cumulative *experience* of men. The definition is only a later proposition, by means of which we try to find the essence of manhood – or at least, men. The proposed definition is itself a product of experience and not some *a priori* or arbitrary concoction. We may for a long time have a vague concept of X, without having found an adequate definition for it. When we do find a definition, it is not necessarily final. It is a hypothesis. It could turn out to be inadequate (for instance, if some rational animals were found on other planets), in which case some further differentia or some entirely new definition of man would need to be proposed.

Note in passing that **tautology** occurs when the predicate is already wholly *explicitly* mentioned in the subject, or the consequent in the antecedent. Thus, “X is X”, “XY is Y”, “if X, then X”, “if X + Y, then Y” are all tautologies. It does not follow that such propositions are considered by logic as necessarily *true*. Their truth depends on the actual existence of the subject or truth of the antecedent. For it is clear that the latter may be merely imaginary or hypothetical, as for example in “unicorns have one horn”. Thus, tautology is not proof of truth.

Clearly, too, a definition like “man is a rational animal” is not tautologous in the strict sense. Some nevertheless consider definition as an implicit sort of tautology, by extending the concept. Those who do so do so because they think that the concept defined is identical to its

definition. This I of course do not agree with, for reasons already stated. Even so, note that if tautology is not proof of truth in the case of explicit tautologies, as just explained, the same follows all the more in the case of implicit ones.

Through definition, we try to identify the ‘essences’ of things. The essence of some concrete thing(s) is rarely if ever itself something concrete, i.e. empirically evident. In most or all cases, essences are *abstractions*. We cannot produce a single mental image or Platonic Idea of man that would represent or reflect all individual men. We just point in the general direction of the notion of manhood by defining men as rational animals, but we cannot concretize it. The constituent terms ‘rational’ and ‘animal’ are themselves in turn just as or more abstract. This important insight can best be seen with reference to geometrical concepts.

In the concept of triangle, all possible physical or imagined triangles are included, those already seen and those yet to be seen, and all their apparent properties and interrelationships. If I ask you what the essence of a triangle is, you are likely to imagine and draw a particular triangle. But this is not the essence; it is *an example* – a mere instance. There is no one concrete triangle that contains all possible triangles. The essence of triangularity does not concretely exist; it is just an abstraction, a verbal or intentional contraption. That is to say, we mean by the ‘essence’ of a triangle, “**whatever happens to be distinctively in common to all triangles**” – but we know we cannot mentally or physically produce such an entity.

The essence in such cases is thus just something pointed to in the foggy distance. We cannot actually produce it, but only at best a particular triangle. We can of course define the triangle in words as “a geometrical figure composed of three lines that meet at their extremities”,

or the like. But such verbal definition still hides the concept of ‘line’, which in turn cannot be concretized except by example; it just passes the buck on. It reduces the problem (of triangular essence) to another problem (that of linear essence), but it does not really solve it. This is perhaps why many logicians and philosophers opt for Nominalism. But we should not allow it to lead us to skepticism.

Rational knowledge is built on the assumption that particulars that *seem to us to have* “something distinctively in common” *do indeed have* something distinctively in common. We extrapolate from appearance to reality, at least hypothetically – i.e. on the understanding that if ever we find some specific observation or logical reason that demands it, we will reclassify the appearance as an illusion instead. This practice is nothing other than *an application of the principle of induction* to the issue of conceptualization. It is logically impossible to argue against this principle without explicitly or implicitly relying on it, since all such argument is itself ultimately inductive. Likewise, being itself conceptual, any putative theory against our belief in abstracts is easily discredited and dismissed.

The essence of an individual is what is conceived as abiding in it through all possible changes; the essence of a kind is that which is conceived has shared by all its possible instances of it. Moreover, in either case, the essence must be found in that thing or kind of thing, and in no other. But though we cannot usually if ever empirically point to anything that fits this definition of essence, we assume each thing or kind to have such a core, *because otherwise we could not recognize it as one and the same* thing or kind. We rely for this assumption on our faculty of insight into similarities and differences. Through such insight, we ‘point towards’ an

essence – though we do not actually experience such essence.

Since the similar things (the individual at different times or the scattered instances of the kind) seem to point *in the same direction*, we infer by extrapolation that they are pointing *at something* in common (the apparent essence). This constitutes a reification of sorts – not into something concrete, but into something “abstract”. There is thus some truth in what Buddhist philosophers say, namely that essences are “empty”. However, we should not like some of them draw the negative conclusion that essences “do not really exist” from this emptiness. For we can, as already mentioned, rely on the principle of induction to justify our inference. Provided we do not confuse abstract existence with concrete existence, we commit no error thereby.

We may call such cognition of essences *conception or conceptual insight*. This implies that just as we have cognitive faculties of perception of phenomenal concretes and intuition of non-phenomenal concretes, so we have a cognitive faculty of conception through which we ‘see’ the similarities and differences between objects. Such insight is not, note well, claimed to be always true – it may well be false *sometimes*, but it cannot be declared always false without self-contradiction. Its veracity in principle is verified by the principle of induction, in exactly the same way as the veracity of experience is in principle verified. That is to say, we may assume in any given case such conceptual insight true, until and unless it there is experiential or rational cause to regard it as false.

It is very important to understand all this, for all rational knowledge depends on it.

## 14. Mind and soul

*Drawn from Logical and Spiritual Reflections (2008-9), book 4, chapters 7, 10-11.*

### 1. Behold the mind

Judging by a collection of essays attributed to Bodhidharma<sup>133</sup>, the latter's teaching of Zen meditation was quite introverted. He keeps stressing the futility of physical acts and rituals, and stresses the necessity of "beholding the mind", to achieve enlightenment/liberation. This message is repeated throughout the volume in various words. For instance:

"Responding, perceiving, arching your eyebrows, blinking your eyes, moving your hands and feet, it's all your miraculously aware nature. And this nature is the mind. And the mind is the buddha... Someone who sees his

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<sup>133</sup> *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, consisting of four essays. Like the translator, Red Pine, I assume their author is indeed Bodhidharma; but who the genial author(s) is/are, is ultimately not very important: some human being(s) had this interesting teaching to transmit to us. I notice that D. T. Suzuki, in his *First Series of Essays in Zen Buddhism*, (pp. 178), mentions six (not just four) Bodhidharma essays as quite well-known and popular in Japan today. While acknowledging the Zen spirit of all those essays, Suzuki considers only two of them as likely to have been written by the first patriarch of Zen.

own nature finds the Way... is a buddha.” (P. 29.)

The implication here is that buddhahood (ultimate realization) is not something far away, like the peak of a high mountain difficult to climb. It is something close by, attainable by a mere change of outlook. That is, the separation between samsara and nirvana is paper-thin: on one side, you are in samsara, and on the other, in nirvana. In his words:

“Seeing through the mundane and witnessing the sublime is less than an eye-blink away. Realization is now.” (P. 113.)

The transition is not to be achieved by elaborate external deeds, but by acute attentiveness. Thus, he states:

“People who seek blessings by concentrating on external works instead of internal cultivation are attempting the impossible.” (P. 95.)

Even so, in view of the ambiguity of the word “mind” the advice to behold the mind remains somewhat difficult to understand precisely. For “mind” (to my mind) in the largest sense includes every aspect of the psyche:

- a. The *real self* (or soul or spirit), which stands as Subject of all acts of consciousness (i.e. awareness of any sort) and the Agent of all acts of volition (will) and valuation (valuing or disvaluing anything). This ‘entity’ is without phenomenal characteristics (“empty” in Buddhist parlance), and

so intuited (apperceived) rather than perceived, note well.

- b. The *faculties or inner acts* of that self – viz. consciousness, volition and valuation. These intentional expressions of the real self are also in themselves devoid of any phenomenal aspects, and so intuited rather than perceived. Here, we must carefully distinguish between the *fact* (or relation) of consciousness and the *content* (or object) of consciousness<sup>134</sup>, as well as distinguish the Subject who is conscious from the particular act of consciousness. And similar distinctions apply to volition and valuation.
- c. The *illusory self* (or ego), a collection of body and mind phenomena that the real self habitually delusively (at least partly delusively) identifies with itself. This composite ‘entity’ includes a multiplicity of changing mental phenomena (i.e. mental projections, memories, imaginations, concepts, verbal descriptions, emotions) and physical phenomena (sensations, sense-perceptions, physical feelings), and is ordinarily confused with the real self. The ego is constantly crystallizing in our mental outlook, if we do not work hard to oppose this seemingly natural tendency<sup>135</sup>.
- d. The *physical infrastructure* of the psyche and its workings; i.e. the nervous system, including the

<sup>134</sup> There is no awareness without content (i.e. object); one is here aware of another act of awareness whose content is in turn something else.

<sup>135</sup> Meditation is precisely the most effective tool for overcoming our built-in tendency to ego formation. Even so, one may at any moment fall back into old ego habits; for example, the other day a young woman looked at me in a certain way, and I found myself flattered and captivated.

brain, spine and nerves, the physiological characteristics of humans that are involved in sensory, motor and emotive functions. This is one sense or aspect of the term “mind” as colloquially used; it is sometimes the intent of the more specific term “unconscious mind”. It is appropriate to refer to these physical structures and events as pertaining to the mind, insofar as they apparently constitute the interface between the material and the mental and spiritual domains; the mind is supported and fed by them and acts on the body and the world beyond it through them.

Note the difference between the last two of these factors of the psyche. The third refers to inner phenomena, a private subjective self-perception (which thereafter may have social ramifications), whereas the fourth refers to objective phenomena (knowable only from the outside, even for the body’s owner).<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> In this regard, it is important not to confuse the latter ‘objectivity’ with an exclusive standard of truth, as do certain modern “scientists”. Such Behaviorism, advocated under a pretext of positivism or radical empiricism, is a non-scientific ideological stance that would more accurately be described as narrow or extremely materialist. It is epistemologically fallacious, because its proponents deliberately ignore a major portion of common personal experience (viz. introspective data), and formulate their theories on the basis of an arbitrary selection of experiential data (viz. physical phenomena). Really, what this anti-phenomenological doctrine signifies is that the convenience of certain low-level laboratory technicians is to be elevated to the status of a philosophy of mind! The psychological motive behind this doctrine is an ailment that afflicts more and more people nowadays: it is a deep personal *fear of introspection* – i.e. of confronting the mental and spiritual aspects of one’s psyche.

Now, when he recommends our “beholding the mind” Bodhidharma is obviously not referring to the third aspect of the psyche, the perceived (phenomenal) aspect; the ego is (rightly) the *bête noire* of the Buddhist. He does sometimes seem to be referring to the fourth aspect of mind, the mystery of the mind’s wordless power over the body; for instance, when he states that no deluded person “understands the movement of his own hands and feet,” or more explicitly put:

“...every movement or state is all your mind. At every moment, where language can’t go, that’s your mind.”<sup>137</sup>

But mostly, Bodhidharma seems to be referring to either the first or to the second of the above-listed factors – i.e. to the intuited (non-phenomenal) aspects of the psyche.

“If you can simply concentrate your mind’s inner light and behold its outer illumination, you’ll dispel the three poisons and drive away the six thieves once and for all. And without effort you’ll gain possession of an infinite number of virtues, perfections and doors to the truth.” (P. 113.)

Sometimes, his emphasis seems to be on the real self; as when he writes: “No karma can restrain this real body” (p. 21), “Awaken to your original body and mind” (p.

<sup>137</sup> P. 23. This makes me think of Tai Chi, which is a meditation on movement, on the relation between the mind and physical movement. Similarly in Yoga.

31); “Your real body has no sensation, etc.” (p. 39), or further (emphasizing the non-phenomenal nature of the real self):

“The buddha is your real body, your original mind. This mind has no form or characteristics, no cause or effect, no tendons or bones... But this mind isn’t outside the material body... Without this mind we can’t move. The body has no awareness.” (P. 43.)

Sometimes, it seems to be on the acts of consciousness, and the related acts of volition and valuation, of that real self; for example:

“Language and behavior, perception and conception are all functions of the moving mind. All motion is the mind’s motion. Motion is its function... Even so, the mind neither moves nor functions, because the essence of its functioning is emptiness and emptiness is essentially motionless.” (Pp. 43-44.)

All this gives me the idea of a meditation consisting of ‘awareness of awareness’. In this meditation, one focuses on *the one who is aware* (oneself) and/or on *the fact of awareness* (as distinct from its content). Whatever material or mental<sup>138</sup> phenomenal objects come to our attention, we simply ignore them and rather

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<sup>138</sup> In the narrower sense of ‘mind’ – referring to *phenomenal events* (memories, imaginations, dreams, verbal thoughts, etc.) only. Note in passing that the term ‘mind’ colloquially also often refers to the *mind space*, the presumed extension *in which* mental phenomena occur.

pay attention to *our being conscious* of them. The objects come and go during the meditation, but the Subject and consciousness endure and are focused on persistently.

It may be suggested that the emphasis ought to be on the awareness rather than on the one aware, for there is a danger in the latter case that one may get fixated on an ego representation of self rather than on the real self. Moreover, my experience is that meditative insight seems to hit a peak when the impression of self seems to disappear; one seems to face the surrounding world unburdened by an extraneous presence. Thus, even if the self is not really absent (since it is being conscious), it is best to behave *as if* it does not exist. For this reason, we should describe this exercise more narrowly as meditation on awareness.

Be mindful of the miracle of your being aware, or of your awareness as such, whether directed outward or inward. Bodhidharma says: “*Buddha* is Sanskrit for what you call *aware, miraculously aware*”<sup>139</sup>. The sense of wonder when observing consciousness is, he clearly suggests, essential to enlightenment<sup>140</sup>. Cultivate this

<sup>139</sup> Verbatim from the present translation; on p. 29.

<sup>140</sup> It is interesting to note in passing how far this viewpoint is from the view of some Buddhists (more ‘Hinayana’ in outlook, perhaps) that Enlightenment is the actual *extinction* of consciousness (and volition and all other aspects of selfhood). For Bodhidharma (a ‘Mahayana’ teacher), the purpose of it all is to reach a summit of consciousness, not *unconsciousness*. The difference is perhaps due to a different reading of the twelve *nidanas* doctrine (on the chain of causation of samsaric existence). According to that, the first three causes in the chain are ignorance, actions and consciousness; these clearly refer respectively to lack of spiritual understanding, acting in

wonderment. Don't take consciousness for granted, making it invisible to itself. Realize the marvel that one thing (you) can see another (whatever you look at, including yourself). Wow! How can such a thing be?

At first, such meditation requires effort; but one can eventually reach an effortless level of concentration that may be characterized as contemplation. Note well that the true object of such meditation on awareness itself is not phenomenal – it has no visual or auditory or tactile or gustatory or olfactory qualities. It is truly spiritual and purely immaterial, and is for this reason likened to a transparent empty space.

Of course, it is not much use to take note of one's awareness just momentarily; one has to persevere in that effort for some time. At the same time, one should beware of making this a “gaining idea”<sup>141</sup>, i.e. of letting such effort become a distraction in itself. One cannot grab hold of results in meditation, but must proceed gently, with some detachment.

I have personally tried such meditation on awareness repeatedly lately, and it seems to be an effective way to discard passing perceptions, fancies and thoughts, and

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accordance with such incomprehension, and the narrow and delusive consciousness emerging from such action. It is not consciousness *per se* which is the problem (as some seem to think), but the *limited and limiting* consciousness of ordinary existence. The solution is therefore not the annihilation of consciousness, but its maximal intensification and expansion. Thus, consciousness as such is not a disvalue, but a value. (In accord with this divergence in interpretation, the Hinayana branch tends to regard Emptiness as nothingness, literally a negative, whereas the Mahayana branch stresses the positive meaning of it, as the “Buddha-nature” underlying all things.)  
<sup>141</sup> Advice often given in his books by a modern disciple of Bodhidharma, Shunryu Suzuki.

attain a more dilated and contemplative state of mind. Although I cannot yet claim to have had the lofty experience of beholding the mind that Bodhidharma recounts, I have found it worthwhile.

## 2. Behold the soul

Although Bodhidharma, as indicated earlier<sup>142</sup>, seems at times to refer to a self in the sense of a soul, we can safely presume that, as an orthodox Buddhist, he did not literally believe in a soul. If asked who or what is beholding the mind, he would probably have answered ‘the mind’. Therefore, when I here bring up the question of soul again, I do not mean to impute such belief on him, but merely speak on my own authority as an ‘independent’ philosopher.

As also earlier indicated, I do agree that it is wise *not to* directly meditate on the self in the sense of soul. The reason being that it is easy for us unenlightened people to confuse our real self with our illusory self. The illusory self is so overwhelmingly present to our consciousness that we cannot easily ignore it. Thus, while hoping to soar meditatively, we may easily get bogged down in a low level of consciousness!

For this reason, I suggested that in our attempt to “behold the mind” we meditate on the fact of our awareness rather than on the person being aware. This is, I think, valid in the early stages of the meditation, at least, till we reach a relatively high level of consciousness.

But since I have reason to believe in the existence of a soul, I must consider such meditative restraint to be a

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In the first section of the present chapter.

temporary “expedient means”, rather than an absolute no-no. It seems therefore legitimate to now suggest that, once one has reached a certain degree of peace of mind and meditative intensity, one may well turn one’s attention on one’s self in the sense of soul.

This, then, would be a sixth aspect and latest stage of our proposed meditation on awareness: eventually becoming aware of oneself being aware. One should do so, not only because awareness is logically inconceivable without someone being aware, but also because this true sort of self-awareness is indeed subtly present in all our exercise of awareness, in everyday life and during meditation, and ought therefore to be acknowledged and concentrated upon.

To summarize: Bodhidharma’s advice to “behold the mind” seems vague and impracticable, in view of the ambiguity of the term “mind”. Of the various senses of the term, he probably meant ‘the fact of consciousness’ and/or ‘the one being conscious’. Granting which, his advice was, more precisely put, to *behold the beholding* and/or to *behold the beholder*. I suggested, to avoid developing ego, to begin by the first of these types of awareness, and at a later stage attempt the second.

The Buddhist idea of a “non-self” (*anatman*) being at all aware is, to my mind at least, logically unthinkable. Such so-called non-self is tacitly reified, even as it is claimed null. To say we have no real self at the core of our consciousness (and volitions and valuations) is to imply us to be mere inanimate objects. To claim that something truly absent may be aware (and will and value) is to deny that certain objects have such power(s) specifically, i.e. while other objects lack such power(s).

To deny that “we” each have a soul, i.e. that we *are* souls, is to turn us into mere things, or more extremely, into nothings. It is then discursively inappropriate to use “we” (or any other noun or pronoun) – yet those who

make such claims continue to use such language. They either are not aware of the paradox involved in doing so, or contradiction does not bother them.

Buddhists claim that at the moment of enlightenment, the self (i.e. the apparent real self, not to mention the more gross illusory self) is *extinguished*. They claim that enlightenment is, precisely, the occurrence and experience of such extinction of the self. After that, “one” exists as a non-self (“in” nirvana), if at all (i.e. not at all, when “one” reaches the final stage, *parinirvana*). But such ideas are logically impossible to defend.

For the question arises, how do *we* know about such extinction? Not from our own experience, since we have not yet become enlightened. Therefore, merely by hearsay<sup>143</sup>. If so, who told us? Buddhists claim: the Buddha told us (first, and then perhaps other teachers who attained *bodhi*). So well and good – but if upon attaining enlightenment his apparent (real as well as illusory) self was fully extinguished, then he was no longer there and could not report anything to us.

If, alternatively, he returned and carried with him the memory of his enlightenment experience, then he was not quite extinguished. For, to return, and to speak of some past experience, implies some sort of *continuity*, i.e. excludes true extinction (which logically implies a radical break with existence). In short, the very idea of

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<sup>143</sup> Hearsay of course has some logical value, but it does not constitute knowledge in the strictest sense. It serves to confirm a hypothesis, but cannot definitely prove it. For even if what the witness says he experienced happens to be absolutely true (in God’s eyes, say), it does not follow that his sincere belief in it is logically unassailable; and even if it were, it does not follow that we (other people) can take his say-so as fact.

an extinction of self being reported by a witness to us after the fact is paradoxical and untenable.

The idea of extinction can only be discursively accepted as a ‘third party’ hypothesis, a conceptual projection by some onlooker, a mere theory or speculation. It cannot *consistently* be upheld as a first-person account based on direct experience of actual obliteration. This being the case, the strict Buddhist idea of a non-self does not withstand logical scrutiny, and must be firmly rejected. For there is a more consistent alternative postulate, namely that we each have a soul, that we are souls.

There has to be a residue of some sort upon enlightenment, else we would not know about it. This does not however mean that the residue is an ongoing individual self; it suffices that the residue be the grand common Self, of which every individual self is but a tiny spark artificially delineated by ignorance. When this illusion of separateness collapses, enlightenment occurs, the individual self disappears but its underlying universal personhood remains.

To show the logic of this conception of enlightenment, an analogy can be made with a raindrop falling back into the ocean. As soon as it plunges into the larger body of water, the drop effectively disappears as an individual drop. The drop is immediately ‘one with’ the sea. Even so, it can conceivably, for a very brief while at least, be retrieved intact.

Similarly, the remnant of spiritual existence can initially report its enlightenment experience, although ultimately all its boundaries dissolve and it fully merges with its Source.

That Source we may call God, following our traditions. Buddhists would call it Buddha-nature, Buddha-mind or original-mind; Hindus would call it Brahman; and each other religion has its name(s) for it. The name is not so

important, I think, as what the word is intended to refer to; I am not so concerned with religious traditions as with their underlying significance.

In truth, when Buddhists pursue liberation from the karmic world, they do not seek total annihilation, absolute death<sup>144</sup>. They rather seek something they call happiness or nirvana. It is an existence, a ‘higher life’ of some sort, though not one subject to the suffering of samsara. Nirvana is certainly something beyond, free of and devoid of all phenomenal characters and events; but that does not mean it is totally nothing, a nihilistic non-existence. It is, let us say, a purely spiritual existence (whatever that means).

Reaching such conclusion, I realize that my thinking on this subject is closer to ‘high’ Hindu philosophy (such as Advaita Vedanta) than to Buddhism. I can never accept the “avatar” idea, so pervasive in Hinduism (as in Christianity), the idea that God can and does incarnate in human or other forms. For me, as a rational philosopher, this is a logically untenable notion; the whole cannot become a part. But many ideas in Hindu philosophy are indeed profound and reasonable.

### 3. The Buddhist no-soul theory

One of the major and distinctive theses of Buddhism is the theory of “no-soul” – (or *anatta* in Pali, *anatman* in Sanskrit). This is part of a larger thesis that nothing has a real essence, the individual soul or self being here

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<sup>144</sup> If so, those who do not believe in rebirth could just commit suicide and be done with this world, without needing to meditate and change their behavior.

conceived as a special case of the concept of essence, i.e. as the essence of a person.

The Buddhist no essences doctrine arose in reaction to a thesis, labeled “Eternalism”, which was apparently normative in Indian philosophy at the time, *that ‘things’ consist of eternal, unchanging ‘essences’, substantial and causally independent entities*. Similarly, with regard to the special case of souls.

The Buddhist no essences doctrine was based on the assumption that the belief in such “essences”, including in particular the belief in souls (as the essences of our bodily and mental existences), is the root cause of our imprisonment in samsara (i.e. our fundamental ignorance and suffering), so that its abandonment would put us in nirvana (i.e. enlighten and liberate us).

There has been a theory very similar to Eternalism in Western philosophy, namely the “Monadology” of Gottfried Liebniz. This was of course an extremist ontological idea, due to a simplistic reading of predication as stating that the predicate is literally “contained in” the subject. That is, that whatever is predicable of anything must be “part of its nature”, and therefore inextricably intrinsic and peculiar to it – so that the world is composed of a multiplicity of eternal substances each of which is an island onto itself.

Opposite such inaccurate philosophy, the Buddhist counter-theory would indeed *prima facie* appear to be a laudable improvement. But, I submit, the Eternalist theory serves Buddhism as a convenient philosophical ‘red herring’. It is surely not the commonsense or scientific worldview (which are effectively ignored by Buddhism); and the Buddhist rebuttal constitutes another extremist position (in the opposite direction), which altogether denies the reality of any essences by allegedly reducing everything in the world to an infinite

crisscross of mutual dependencies (the co-dependence or interdependence theory).

Although Buddhists would protest that their thesis is not the opposite extreme, viz. Nihilism, but a middle way between those two extremes, it is hard to see how we might reasonably not judge it as an extreme view. It is true that there are two, nay three, Buddhist positions in this context. One, attributed to the Theravada branch, of ultimately a total void (extinction in meditation); another, attributed to the mainstream Mahayana branch, of an ultimate original ground (an underlying universal spiritual substance of sorts, albeit one piously declared ‘void’ or ‘empty’); and a third, claimed by Zen adepts, of neither this nor that, i.e. fence-sitting between the previous two positions (hence, more ‘middle way’ than them).

Of these three, the said mainstream Mahayana option would seem the least Nihilistic, in that it admits of some sort of real existence – viz. the existence of the “original ground”. Logically, however, this Monist thesis (to which I personally tend to adhere) should logically be classed as an Eternalist philosophy of sorts, since the original ground is beyond impermanence. Impermanent appearances continuously bubble forth from it, but it is everywhere and ever one and the same calm fullness. Thus, the other two Buddhist theses, which are more clearly anti-Eternalist, can reasonably be viewed as Nihilist rather than middle way.

The commonsense view (to which most of us adhere, consciously or not) is rather noncommittal on such issues. It is truly a middle way, without prejudice. It does not draw any such general conclusions offhand. It neither reduces everything to independent substances nor reduces everything to mutually dependent non-substances, but remains open to there being perhaps a bit of both these extreme scenarios present in the real

world, and other options besides. At a more scientific level, this common view becomes the “laws of nature” approach – the idea that there are various degrees of being and forms of dependencies, which (in the physical domain, at least, and possibly in the mental domain to some extent) are best expressed through quantitative formulas.

In such ordinary viewpoint, there seems to be some concrete ‘substance(s)’ in the world, but not everything is reducible to this concept. Furthermore, substantial things need not be individually permanent, but change is possible from one form to another. However, Physics does assume as one of its basic premises a law of conservation of matter and energy – i.e. that the total quantity of physical substance is constant. Moreover, that which is impermanent lasts for a while. Things that exist must exist for some time (some more, some less) – they cannot logically be so impermanent as to “exist” for no time at all.

Anyway, the concept of essence is certainly not, in our commonplace view, equated to that of substance. Essences are rarely substances, but usually structures or processes that seem to be generally and exclusively present in the phenomena at hand, and so are used to define them. Essences are usually *abstractions*, i.e. rational insights or concepts, rather than concrete percepts or objects of perception. Abstraction claims validity of insight without claiming to be literally within reality; though it depends on a Subject to occur, it in principle correctly interprets the Object. One cannot deny abstraction as such without resorting to abstractions – so such a skeptical position would be logically untenable.

In the Buddhist view, in contradistinction, the apparent or alleged essences of things are *conventional*, or even *purely nominal*, and souls are no exceptions to this rule.

By “conventional” (and all the more so by “nominal”) is here meant that we, the people who believe in essences or souls, project this idea onto reality, whereas reality has in fact no such thing in it. In Buddhist epistemology, people ordinarily use their mind conventionally (or under the bad influence of words) in this manner, projecting onto reality things that are absent in it.

How (we may ask) do we know that reality is not as it appears to the ordinary mind? We know this, according to this theory, through enlightened consciousness. Thus, Buddhist epistemology, while invalidating ordinary consciousness, affirms the optimistic idea that we can transcend it and see things as they are. This can, incidentally, be compared and contrasted to Kantian epistemology, which likewise claims our phenomenal knowledge to be imperfect, but distinctively puts the perfection of ‘noumenal’ knowledge beyond our reach. While this theory of Immanuel Kant’s is inconsistent with itself, the Buddhist theory is not so in that respect.

Still, note well the difference between ordinary ‘abstractionism’ and Buddhist conventionalism or nominalism. For the Buddhists, as in Kant, our minds *invent* abstractions without any objective support; whereas in ordinary rational epistemology, abstraction is *an act of rational insight* – i.e. it does record something objective, which is not a pure figment of the imagination.

In addition to the said epistemological explanation or rationalization of its no-soul thesis, Buddhist philosophers propose various ontological claims and arguments. According to them, all things, including apparent souls, lack essence, because they are impermanent and discontinuous. They say this can be readily observed, and that in any case it can be logically argued – as well as being evident to anyone who is enlightened.

With regard to observation, they claim (much like David Hume later) to have looked for a soul everywhere within themselves and never found one. The soul is therefore (to them) an illusion of conventionally minded people – who are deluded by their ego (bodily and mental appearances of selfhood) into believing that there is something (i.e. someone) at the center of all their experience and thought.

But we must note that this is of course not a pure observation of an absence of soul, but a generalization from a number of failures to positively observe a soul. The generalization of negation could be right, but it does not have quite the same epistemological status as a positive observation. There is nothing empirically or logically necessary about the no-soul claim. At least, not from the point of view of an unenlightened person; and it is hard to see how an enlightened person could avoid equal reliance on generalization.

Moreover, we can fault their inference and larger argument by pointing out that it is absurd to look for the soul in the phenomenal realm (i.e. with reference to perceived sensible qualities, like sights, sounds, odors, savors, tactile feelings, whether mental or physical), if the soul happens to be a non-phenomenal entity (something intuited, which has in itself no phenomenal aspects).

It is worth additionally clarifying that, though our soul is a non-material, spiritual substance at the center of a multitude of mental and physical phenomena, it is not their “essence” or defining character. Our soul is “us”, our self – the subject of our cognitions and agent of our volitions and valuations. It is an intellectual error to try and identify us with things that are only associated with us. We are not one with or part of our minds and/or bodies, but something beyond them, though in their

midst, cognizing and interacting with them in various ways.

With regard to impermanence, Buddhists apparently consider that, since our soul always has an apparent beginning (our birth) and end (our death), it is necessarily illusory. In their view – reflecting the general assumption, it seems, of ancient Indian philosophy, what is temporary (or passing) is necessarily illusory; only the permanent (or eternal) is real. Moreover, in their view, nothing is eternal – by which they mean, surely, that nothing phenomenal is eternal; for they certainly believe in the eternity of enlightenment or of the underlying “nature of mind” or “ground of all being” – even if they affirm this universal substratum to be ultimately “empty”.

But this viewpoint can be contested. To be real is to be a fact, i.e. to occur or have occurred. How long or short this fact is or was or will be is surely irrelevant to its status as a fact. An illusion is something that is or was thought to be but is not or was not. To identify reality with eternity and illusion with impermanence is to confuse two separate issues. I have never come across a convincing argument why such equations ought to be made. Surely, one can imagine eternal illusions and transient realities. Thus, we should consider that the issue of the soul’s persistence, i.e. whether the soul is eternal or as short-lived as the body and mind evidently are, has nothing to do with its reality or illusion.

The Buddhist argument against the soul also appeals to the general idea of discontinuity, i.e. the idea that everything changes all the time, and so nothing can ever be pointed to as “one and the same thing” from one moment to the next. This idea is presented as an observation – but it is clearly a mere hypothesis, an abstraction extrapolated from an observation. Given the observed fact of change, one can equally well suppose

that some sort of continuity underlies pairs of moments. Since all we actually experience are the successive moments, the issue as to whether some residue of each moment is to be found in the next is open to debate. Thus, to speak of discontinuity is already to *assume* something beyond observation.

Furthermore, even given a seeming discontinuity, we cannot draw a definite conclusion that there *really* is discontinuity – let alone that this is true in all cases. Discontinuity is an *abstraction* from experience; it is not a pure object of experience. Additionally, the concept of *universal* discontinuity remains always somewhat open to doubt, because it is an inductive assumption – at best, a mere generalization. Moreover, the internal consistency of this concept is unsure, since it implies a *permanence* of discontinuity across time. That is, if we regard abstraction as necessarily implying some sort of continuity (whether of the object or of the subject), the concept of discontinuity is self-contradictory when taken to an extreme.

This insight is especially pertinent in the case of the soul, which is here both subject and object. We could not possibly claim to know for a fact that the soul is discontinuous (i.e. a succession of discrete momentary souls), because such a statement claims for the soul to the ability to *transcend* discontinuity sufficiently to see that the soul is discontinuous. That is to say, to make such a claim, the soul (as subject) must be *present in the time straddling* two or more of its alleged merely momentary instances or segments (i.e. the soul as object). This is clearly a self-contradiction. Thus, the Buddhist argument in favor of the thesis that the soul is non-existent does not survive serious logical scrutiny.

Another Buddhist claim regarding the soul is that it is subject to “dependent origination” or “conditioning” – i.e. that its actual existence, as a unit of being, as a fact

– is impossible in isolation, is only possible in relation to all other things (which are themselves similarly interdependent). However, this theory – that everything in the universe could only exist in the presence of everything else in the universe, and that a smaller universe (holding just one of those things, or some but not all of them) is inconceivable – is just a speculation; it is not proved in any way.

Moreover, we could again ask whether this theory is consistent with itself. If it is, like all sublunary things, something dependent or conditioned – and it surely is so, notably with reference to human experience and thought – how can it be claimed as a universal and eternal truth? Any claim that the relative is absolute seems paradoxical and open to doubt. There has to be something absolute to anchor the relative on. To claim everything dependent on everything else and vice versa is still to claim this big soup of interdependent things to be an independent thing. And if this in turn is not an irreducible fact, something else must be. There is no way to be an absolute relativist!

The belief that something can be “both A and not-A”, or “neither A nor not-A”, seems to be the essence of all mysticism (in the pejorative sense). The claim to make no claim is itself a claim – there is no escape from this logic. To claim that everything is illusory is to claim this as a fact – i.e. as something that is not illusory. To claim there is nothing, no person, at the core of our being might seem superficially at first sight logically possible, i.e. not self-contradictory – until we ask just who is making the claim and to whom it is addressed. Inanimate objects are not concerned with such issues. A non-self can neither be deluded nor realize its delusion. Any occurrence of cognition, valuation or volition implies a self.

## 15. Historical perspectives

*Drawn from Logical and Spiritual Reflections (2008-9), book 4, chapters 12-15, and book 3, chapter 21.*

### 1. Buddhist historicity

Buddhism emerged in northeast India about 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> Cent. BCE. It did not, of course, emerge in a cultural vacuum. India already had a rich religious culture, based on the Vedas and Upanishads, which gave rise to other religions, notably the Hindu.

It seems to be historical fact that Buddhism was founded by a man called Siddhartha Gautama, though historians disagree as to the exact dates of his life; most of them, in India and the West, suggest he lived in 563-483 BCE, others, in Japan, suggest 448-368 BCE.<sup>145</sup>

Whatever the case, it seems reasonable to assume that Buddhism began with this single man's teachings, and over time expanded and evolved. It does not follow, of course, that all the stories that have come down to us concerning him are historically true, nor that all statements made in his name were indeed made or implied by him.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

<sup>146</sup> The following illustrates of the inaccuracy of transmission of information by tradition: Dogen writes at one point (p. 242): "It has been twenty-two hundred years since the Buddha's pari-nirvana"; assuming this is not an error of translation or a typographical error, and considering this text was written in 1246 CE, Dogen was mistaken by some 500 years!

More significant philosophically is the issue as to whether this man's claim of "complete enlightenment and liberation" is true or not. No historian can ever answer that question. It is not inconceivable that such a metaphysical experience and event is humanly possible, but it would be hard to prove or disprove it. The one claiming such "Buddha" status can only be truly understood and justified by another person with the same privilege; and all others can only take it on faith, or refuse to do so.

It is as with any witness – the witness was there and saw and heard what he claims; but others, who were not present, have still to decide whether or not to believe his say-so. His testimony supports but does not definitively prove the hypothesis. We have to take into consideration the possibilities that he misunderstood or deluded himself, or exaggerated or lied to impress or manipulate others, or that reports concerning him were or have become distorted. These things do happen, even today; and in olden days, the boundary between fact and fiction was perhaps more tenuous still.

Notwithstanding the speculative presuppositions, it seems fair for us to still conventionally call this man the "Buddha" (meaning the enlightened one). Insofar as the doctrine of Buddhism depends on faith in certain metaphysical possibilities, it must be regarded as a religion. Even so, it includes some very philosophical insights and discussions, and so may also be regarded as a philosophy.

This philosophical tradition is very broad and varied, and subject to very divergent interpretations. I do not claim to know more than a small fraction of this field of study, but nevertheless feel justified in sharing my reflections concerning the little I do know. For a start, this could be viewed as a record of one man's gradual assimilation or rejection of Buddhist ideas. But

moreover, I feel impelled to comment by virtue of the original and extensive logical tools I bring to bear.

I have sometimes been criticized concerning my criticism of Nagarjuna's philosophy, through arguments that I did not exactly represent it. But my answer is always this: though I cannot vouch that my arguments are perfectly applicable to Nagarjuna's philosophy as it really is, I stand by my arguments with regard to their applicability to the ideas I presented under the label of 'Nagarjuna's philosophy'. From a philosophical point of view, my arguments are interesting and valid, even if from a historical viewpoint some issues may be left open. In any event, historians have varying interpretations, too.

Philosophy is concerned with ideas, and the issue of who precisely proposed them and when exactly is not so important. A philosopher (X) may represent, analyze and criticize an idea, without having to be absolutely accurate as to whether his formulation of the idea is exactly identical to its original formulation by some historical person (Y). So long as we understand that it is the idea as here and now represented that is being considered and discussed, the account given is philosophically respectable. Historians may debate whether X's account corresponds exactly to Y's initial idea, and to what extent X's discussion is relevant to Y's philosophy, but this is historical debate, not philosophy. Concerning the credibility of Buddhism, we may also ask questions from the specific point of view of Judaism (and its derivative religions: Christianity, Islam and their derivatives in turn). A crucial question would be: if the claim of Buddhism to enlightenment and liberation is true, how come such a major human breakthrough to spirituality was never predicted or mentioned in the Jewish Bible and later books? Another

question would be: if the Buddha went so high, how come he did not meet or mention meeting God?

These are of course questions for those who choose to adhere to Jewish (or Christian or Moslem) beliefs, for the Buddhist would simply regard the failure of the Judaic traditions to foresee or notice the Buddha's attainment, or the failure of the Buddha to acknowledge God, as a problem of theirs and not of his.

Personally, I prefer to keep an open mind in both directions, and emphasize the positive teachings on both sides, rather than stress conflicts between West and East. It is a historical fact that different segments of humanity have evolved spiritually in different ways – and that may well be God's will. Our evolutions are still ongoing, and we may yet all come to an agreement. We can surely learn from and enrich each other, and the current historical phase of globalization can profit us all spiritually.

## 2. About Buddhist idolatry

I am comforted in my conviction that Buddhism is not originally and intrinsically idolatrous<sup>147</sup> after reading

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<sup>147</sup> Note that my use of this epithet is not intended to disparage Buddhism as a whole or Buddhists in general. My concern over “idolatry” is of course an expression of my Jewish roots and values (starting with the first two of the Ten Commandments). I admit frankly that I find such behavior patterns silly and extraneous. Nevertheless, I also have great respect and admiration for the more essential Buddhist beliefs and practices. When I read the stories or writings of past Buddhist teachers, I am readily convinced they are great souls, deeply moral and profound in their spiritual achievements. Moreover, my opposition to idolatry does not

some of Mu Soeng's historical comments, like the following.

"For the Sthaviras, the Buddha Shakyamuni was a historical personage—a great teacher but not a divinity. The Mahayanists, however, saw the Buddha as a transcendental principle rather than a mere individual in the phenomenal world." (P. 19.)

This confirms that the deification of this flesh and blood teacher is a late event in Buddhist history – occurring a few hundred years after the fact. It should be pointed out and emphasized that such deification was logically *in contradiction to* the essential message of Siddhartha Gautama (the founder of Buddhism).

Why? Because the message of this teacher was that he, *a mere human being*, was able to transcend samsara (the domain of karma) and attain nirvana (the domain of freedom). If it turns out that this apparent man was in fact *not a man at all, but a "god"* intending or predestined to save mankind, then the practical demonstration of the possibility *for humans* of liberation from the wheel of birth and death would not have been made!

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prevent me from appreciating the artistic value of Buddhist statuary and temples, some of which (notably, Angkor) I have visited. Perhaps, then, we should say that Buddhism (like Christianity) merits respect *in spite of* the forms of idolatry (deification of people and worship directed at statues) that have become attached to it. Certainly, Jews at least should always remain vigilant and be careful not to get drawn into anything suggestive of idolatry.

If, as later Buddhists depicted him, he was a god, then his essential existential condition was not comparable to that of a man, and it could well be argued that his achievement could not be replicated by other men. The whole point of his story is that an ordinary human being can by his own intelligence and effort, even without the supervision of an accomplished teacher<sup>148</sup>, develop understanding and overcome all suffering forever. To change that story is to miss the point.

Some, of course, would argue that, though he was not a god incarnate at birth, he became “divine” upon attaining buddhahood, and more so at the end of his life (when he entered *parinirvana*). This scenario was also, however, a later interpretation of events, motivated by devotionalism.

“...the rise of devotionalism in Mahayana. ...around the time of the beginning of the common era, in north-western India, under Greek and Mediterranean influences, Buddha statues were sculpted for the first time. In early Buddhism, as in the contemporaneous Upanishad literature, we find that the idea of a personality cult was frowned upon. In ancient India the veneration of a holy person took the form of worshipping a memorial shrine (stupa) rather than a physical image.” (P. 91.)

<sup>148</sup> See the *Dhammapada*, v. 353: “I myself found the way. Whom shall I call Teacher?” The author (i.e. the Buddha, presumably) adds: “Whom shall I teach” – suggesting this attainment is not something that can simply be taught, like mathematics or English.

Originally, Buddhism was not a religion of devotion, but of morality and meditation. It did not consist in worship of the Buddha (as a god or later still as God), or of a multitude of Buddhas, but in following his example (as a successful spiritual explorer and teacher). Moreover, the adoration of statues (as a specific form of devotion) representing the Buddha and other figures in the Buddhist pantheon was, it seems, a possibly separate and still later phenomenon.

It may be, as the above quotation suggests, that idolatry was not a religious behavior pattern indigenous to India, but one imported from the West. One might have assumed idolatry to have been an older cultural habit in India (in view of its ubiquity there today), but historians have apparently<sup>149</sup> not found evidence in support of such a hypothesis. However, it remains true that in regions of Asia farther north and east, Hindu or other forms of idolatry may have preceded the arrival of Buddhism, and that Buddhism merely accommodated them.

In this regard, we must probably distinguish the geographical movements of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism, being itself relatively more idolatrous from its inception, would merge more readily with preexisting local idolatries; whereas, Theravada Buddhism, although relatively less idolatrous originally, would rather begin by tolerating the local customs it encountered, by considering them as

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<sup>149</sup> According to Mu Soeng's account. Note that in my *Buddhist Illogic*, chapter 10, I assumed that the worship of statues in India antedated the advent of Buddhism. In any case, idolatry is a wide concept not limited to the worship of statues. It includes all forms of polytheistic worship, and even the idea of an incarnation of a unique God. In this sense, at least, the religious culture of India (viz. Vedism) that preceded Buddhism was certainly idolatrous.

among the human foibles that it had to deal with to gradually effect liberation.

Here, we can quote Stephen Batchelor<sup>150</sup> with regard to Tibet in the ninth century, to illustrate the movement and adaptation of Buddhism:

“Padmasambhava’s presentation of Buddhism through the medium of tantric deities and forces struck a very sympathetic and receptive chord within the minds of the Tibetans. The subsequent widespread popularity of tantric practice can probably be attributed to the innate spiritual disposition of the Tibetans to respond more readily to religious truths that are embodied and personified. In this way the teachings of Buddhism came alive for the Tibetans and ceased to be mere abstract ideas and doctrines.” (P. 48.)

Each people or culture, at a given time in history, has its particular spiritual predispositions. These will somewhat determine what they will accept in the way of imports, and how they will interpret it, and what they will disregard or reject. This too can be illustrated with reference to Tibet. Thus, Batchelor writes:

“The Tibetans seem to have been entirely unaffected by the teachings of ... the two great doctrinal traditions which flourished across the border in China. Neither were they aware of the commentarial tradition ... prevalent in the Theravada schools of Sri Lanka and South-East

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<sup>150</sup> In his Introduction.

Asia. Yet the most remarkable instance of the Tibetans' resistance to other forms of Buddhism is found in their reaction to the attempted introduction of the Ch'an (Zen) school from China during the eighth century." (P. 64.)

The above criticism of Mahayana has perhaps an exception in the case of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. Although the modern Zen meditation centers I have seen all had statues of the Buddha on display, the philosophy of Zen is essentially non-devotional or even anti-devotional. This can be textually confirmed, for instance by the following extract from the *Bloodstream Sermon* traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma<sup>151</sup>:

"But deluded people don't realize that their own mind is the buddha. They keep searching outside. They never stop invoking buddhas or worshipping buddhas... Don't indulge in such illusions... Even if a buddha or bodhisattva should suddenly appear before you, there's no need for reverence. This mind of ours is empty and contains no such form... Why worship illusions born of the mind? Those who worship don't know, and those who know don't worship." (Pp. 25, 27.)

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<sup>151</sup> The reputed Indian founder of specifically Ch'an Buddhism in China (c. 490-528 CE). Some modern scholars attribute this sermon to later monks, perhaps "of the Oxhead Zen School, which flourished in the seventh and eighths centuries", according to Red Pine, the translator, though he accepts the traditional attribution (see his Introduction).

This passage clearly reasons that attachment to religious visions, and all the more therefore to representations, is antithetical to the core Buddhist belief. In the *Breakthrough Sermon*, replying to the question as to whether “casting statues” and other such external practices apparently taught in some sutras are of any use to achieving enlightenment, the Zen master answers that these are mere “metaphors”; he explains:

“The Tathagata’s sublime form can’t be represented by metal. Those who seek enlightenment regard their bodies as the furnace, the Dharma as the fire, wisdom as the craftsmanship, and the three sets of precepts and six paramitas as the mold. They smelt and refine the true buddha-nature within themselves and pour it into the mold formed by the rules of discipline. Acting in perfect accordance with the Buddha’s teaching, they naturally create a perfect likeness.” (Pp. 95-96.)

Note well the phrase “within themselves”. Repeatedly, he insists on the redundancy and uselessness of any such external works and deeds; the essence of the Way is working on oneself, from the inside.

Even today, some Buddhists, at least some Zen teachers, seem to eschew idol worship. Note for instance Shunryu Suzuki’s statement:

“In our practice we have no... special object of worship. ... Joshu, a great Chinese Zen master, said, ‘A clay Buddha cannot cross water; a bronze Buddha cannot get through a furnace; a wooden Buddha cannot get through fire.’” (P. 75.)

### 3. Buddhist messianism

Mu Soeng also writes:

“The notion of past Buddhas was most likely accepted even during the lifetime of Shakyamuni.... By first century C.E., ...the notion of past and future Buddhas seems to have been well established. We can only speculate what influence the concept of world savior to come (*sayosant*), from the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, might have exercised on these developments.” (P. 55.)

With regard to the idea of a world savior, i.e. the messianic idea, I would not agree that it was probably imported. It is intrinsic to Buddhism, in the way of a prime given, that Buddha Shakyamuni<sup>152</sup>, by finding his own way to Realization (assuming he did), and then preaching that way to others, broke the ground for all humanity and showed them a way to salvation. By definition, his achievement (if it indeed occurred) is extraordinary and of universal significance.

The story goes that he could have been satisfied with his own personal escape from samsara; but out of compassion (*karuna*) for other sentient beings, he chose to put off his final departure (*parinirvana*) so as to help them out first. We may therefore consider him as an unselfish person, one wishing to save others, and admit

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<sup>152</sup> This name simply means “the Sage from Shakya”, referring to his place of origin.

that Buddhism from its inception had ambitious soteriological motives.

This does not mean that Shakyamuni's breakthrough was necessarily unique. There is no logical reason to exclude that there may have been past Buddhas before this one or that there would be future ones after this one. On the contrary, granting that Shakyamuni's achievement was 'natural' (in a large sense, allowing for the transcending of immanent nature, i.e. of physical and mental identity), we would expect past and future Buddhas to be possible and likely.

Shakyamuni may have been the first, or there may have been others before him whose existence and whose possible teaching may not have left a historical trace. As for future Buddhas, the very fact that Shakyamuni taught implies that he considered that others could also attain buddhahood.

In this perspective, the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva appears like a perfectly natural development. By his own altruism, in delaying his *parinirvana* to teach, the Buddha gave the example of this practice. However, in time the bodhisattva ideal was perhaps taken to extremes. As Mu Soeng points out:

"The bodhisattva was thought to embody not only a spirit of compassion but also one of voluntary suffering. At times, the resolve of the bodhisattva was expressed in almost Christian terms. The idea of the suffering savior may have existed in some form in the Middle East before Christianity arose, but it did not appear in Buddhism until after the Christian era. The suffering bodhisattva so closely resembles the Christian conception of God in the form of Jesus who gave his life for others that we cannot

dismiss the possibility that Buddhism borrowed this doctrine from Christianity, which was vigorous in Persia from the third century C.E. onward.” (P. 55.)<sup>153</sup>

There is (in my opinion) little in the original teaching of Buddhism to justify this particular development. Though Shakyamuni gave the example of altruism, he did not take it to the extreme of personal sacrifice, i.e. of suffering greatly for others. This notion could even be conceived as antithetical to original Buddhism, which after all is intended as a path for removing and avoiding suffering. Its teaching was positive, intended to make people healthy and happy, and not to cause them difficulties. The Buddha remained serene all his life, according to reports.

We should perhaps here distinguish two ways of suffering for others. A person wishing to help others may accept to suffer incidentally or accidentally in this pursuit. The suffering involved is not *per se* the means to the helpful goal, but only an unfortunate side effect. For example, a war hero goes first into battle, hoping to clear the way for his friends; he knows he may get killed or wounded, but that is not his intention; on the contrary,

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<sup>153</sup> The Christian trinity is another doctrine which has a very close parallel in Buddhism, viz. the *trikaya* (three bodies of the Buddha). The resemblance between “father, holy ghost and son” (mentioned in Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14) and “*dharma**kaya*, *samboghakaya* and *nirmanakaya*” (see Mu Soeng, pp. 89-90) is striking, although some differences can no doubt be pointed to. Here again, whether there has been an influence either way, or this is a similar response of the human intellect to the same problem of unification, is a moot issue. Judaism, for its part, has no recourse to a trinitarian concept of God.

the more unscathed he gets through, the better (for he can then carry on fighting).

More prosaically, one may carry an old lady's shopping bag to stop her suffering muscular pains. The Christian ideal is not this – but rather one of “taking up the suffering of others”. This means, not just relieving others' burdens (which cause them suffering), but experiencing their suffering in their stead. Jesus on the cross is depicted as suffering *in the place of* sinners, so they do not have to pay the price for their sins. This is a distinctive concept of altruism, which I doubt was originally intended in Buddhism.

I do not see how suffering as such can have any utility to anyone. To free someone else of suffering one must neutralize the causes of that suffering. Such intervention may occasionally cause oneself suffering – and it is easy to appreciate the virtue, value and beauty of such ‘selfless’ acts. If one realizes the relativity and impermanence of this world, one is not afraid of such personal sacrifice. But it is not one's suffering that relieves the person one helps, but one's effective action. The bodhisattva's role is not to suffer, but to be effective<sup>154</sup>.

#### 4. Assimilating Buddhism

The migration of Buddhism to the West is bound to produce something new in many respects. Shunryu

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<sup>154</sup> Suffering when helping others is not necessarily proof of unusual goodness; it is often just a sign of incompetence. Sometimes risks are taken and may result in personal pain, damage or destruction, but this is usually due to lack of skill. Tragedy is usually indicative of some weakness and failure.

Suzuki<sup>155</sup> admitted as much when he said to his students: "Here in America we cannot define Zen Buddhists the same way we do in Japan.... You are on your way to discovering some appropriate way of life."

This would not be a phenomenon particular to Buddhism, but concerns any religion or cultural product. We can observe for example the movement of Christianity into Africa, South America and Asia. In each case, there are noticeable differences from the European original. And indeed, even among Europeans (and North Americans), Christianity has a variety of expressions. The same applies to Buddhism in Asia, and can be expected to apply to Buddhism in North America and Europe.

How did Buddhism migrate westward? First, Europeans came in contact with Buddhism (and other Oriental religions) in Asia. Some there showed their curiosity and willingness to learn, and eventually brought back some oral teachings, practices and texts to Europe. They gave lectures, and wrote articles and books, passing on Buddhist ideas. Documents were translated, as conscientiously as possible, both by Westerners and Orientals. Eventually, some Orientals came to Europe and North America to teach in person.

Translation is impossible without some interpretation. Every teacher carries a large part of tradition, but also a small part of personal interpretation. Necessarily, when any religion or cultural product arrives at a new region or country, it has to mix somewhat with the local culture, resulting in a new variation on the theme<sup>156</sup>. However purist the recipients try to be, their vision

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<sup>155</sup> P. 133.

<sup>156</sup> An interesting example, because of its overt and extreme eclecticism, is the Cao Dai religion in Vietnam.

cannot help but be colored to some extent by their cultural antecedents. This is true of peoples – and it is true of individuals.

Some individuals pick and choose what pleases them in the import, while others try to go all the way and become orthodox. But whatever external appearances suggest, what goes on inside each individual is a commonplace process of assimilation of new ideas. Each individual has to digest the new outlook in accord with his or her personal psychological and intellectual parameters. In some cases, some rejection sooner or later occurs; in some cases, the individual finds his or her needs largely satisfied.

My own writing on Buddhism can accordingly be regarded as an account of my personal reactions, as a Western and Jewish philosopher, and especially as a logician, to this incoming wave of ideas, at a particular place and time. I am not standing aloof on some pedestal. I make no claim to superiority or omniscience, but simply share my thoughts – frankly evaluating, criticizing, praising, rejecting, adapting, and conflating as seems appropriate. Not liking to be fooled or intimidated, I try not to take anything for granted; but I keep an open mind and a humble willingness to learn.

I have certainly over time learnt a lot, and often been pleasantly surprised and affected. I am always grateful for any knowledge, wisdom or virtue transmitted to me. Certainly, Buddhism – and the Orient in general – has a lot to teach us. I do not however believe it is omniscient and immune to feedback and correction. I do believe the philosophical and spiritual confluence of East and West can be of benefit to both sides; it is not a one-way street, either way. With maturity, we can jointly evolve some common understanding and direction.

## 5. Reason and spirituality

In Judaism, the rabbis consciously practice non-contradiction (and the other laws of thought) in most of their discourse; but in some cases, they desert this virtue. For example, it often happens that equally authoritative commentators have divergent interpretations of the same text; nevertheless, both their positions are upheld as traditional and true so as to avoid any suggestion that any important rabbi might ever be wrong. In such cases, the rationale given is that the different, even conflicting, perspectives together deepen and enrich the overall understanding of that text. In non-legal contexts (*haggadah*), there is no pressing need to decide one way or the other, anyway; while in legal contexts (*halakhah*), a decision is often made by majority<sup>157</sup>.

Also, as I have shown in my *Judaic Logic*, some of the hermeneutic principles used in the Talmud are not in conformity with syllogistic logic; some yield a *non-sequitur* in conclusion, and some even a contradiction. In such cases, the absurdity occurs on a formal level, within a single line of reasoning (rather than in relation to conflicting approaches); yet the conclusion is often accepted as law anyway, because the (erroneous) form of reasoning is considered traditional and Divinely given.

However, it is interesting to note in this regard that there is a Talmudic law<sup>158</sup> about two people who find a prayer shawl and bring it together to the rabbinical court, both

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<sup>157</sup> Although in some cases, centuries later, scattered groups of Jews may follow different interpretations of the same decision.

<sup>158</sup> I unfortunately cannot find the exact Mishna reference at this time, but I heard it discussed by two Rabbis.

claiming it as their property (on a finders-keepers basis); these people are not permitted to both swear they found it first, since these oaths would be in contradiction and that would make one of them at least a vain use of God's name (a grave sin).

This Judaic law shows that the rabbis are ultimately forced to admit the logical law of non-contradiction as binding, i.e. as indicative of objective reality.

Similarly, in Buddhism, there are many teachers who insist on the importance of keeping one's feet firmly on the ground even while one's head is up in the heavens. They teach that karmic law should not be ignored or denied<sup>159</sup> – meaning that one should not act as if there are no laws of nature in this world and anything goes. To act irresponsibly is foolish and at times criminal. I would include under this heading adherence to the laws of thought; for without the awareness, harmony and clarity that they enjoin, healthy respect for causality would not be possible.

It is important, at this juncture in the history of philosophy, that people understand the danger of denial of all, or any, of the laws of thought. Due to the current influx of Oriental philosophies, and in particular of Buddhism, some would-be philosophers and logicians are tempted (perhaps due to superficial readings) to take up such provocative positions, to appear fashionable and cutting-edge. But while predicting that Western philosophy will be greatly enriched by this influx, I

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<sup>159</sup> I give you for example Dogen, who quoting Baizhang ("don't ignore cause and effect"), Nagarjuna ([do not] "deny cause and effect in this worldly realm... in the realm of practice"), Yongjia ("superficial understanding of emptiness ignores causes and effect") and others, decries "those who deny cause and effect" (pp. 263-9).

would warn against abject surrender of our rationality, which can only have destructive consequences for mankind.

Logic is one of man's great dignities, an evolutionary achievement. But it is true: logic alone, without meditation, morality and other human values, cannot bring out the best in man. Taken alone like that, it can and sometimes does apparently lead people to narrow-minded and sterile views, and dried-up personalities. But in the last analysis, people of that sort are simply poor in spirit – their condition is not the fault of logic as such. In fact, they misunderstand logic; they have a faulty view of it – usually an overly deductive, insufficiently inductive view of it.

The current ills of our society are not due to a surfeit of logic. Rather, our society is increasingly characterized by illogic. Many media, politicians and educators twist truth at will, and people let themselves to be misled because they lack the logical capacity or training required to see through the lies and manipulations. Rationality does not mean being square-minded, rigid or closed, as its opponents pretend – it means, on the contrary, making an effort to attain or maintain spiritual health. To give up reason is to invite mental illness and social disintegration. Taken to extremes, unreason would be a sure formula for insanity and social chaos.

Aristotle's answer to irrationality was effectively to train and improve our reason. I do not think this is “the” single, complete solution to the human condition – but it is for sure *part of* the compound solution. Logic is only a tool, which like any tool can be unused, underused, misused or abused. Logic can only produce opinion, but as I said before it helps produce the best possible opinion in the context of knowledge available at any given time and place. It is not magic – only hard work, requiring much study.

Rationalism is sometimes wrongly confused with ‘scientism’, the rigid state of mind and narrow belief system that is leading mankind into the spiritual impasse of materialism and amorality. On this false assumption, some people would like to do away with rationalism; they imagine it to be an obstacle to spiritual growth. On the contrary, rationality is mental health and equilibrium. It is the refusal to be fooled by sensual pursuits—or spiritual fantasies. It is remaining lucid and open at all times.

The ‘scientific’ attitude, in the best sense of the term, should here be emphasized. For a start, one should not claim as raw data more than what one has oneself experienced in fact. To have intellectually understood claims of enlightenment by the Buddha or other persons is not equivalent to having oneself experienced this alleged event; such hearsay data should always be admitted with a healthy ‘grain of salt’. Faith should not be confused with science; many beliefs may consistently with science indeed be taken on faith, but they must be admitted to be articles of faith.

Note well that this does not mean that we must forever cling to surface appearances as the only and final truth. There may well be a ‘noumenal’ level of reality beyond our ordinary experience and the rational conclusions we commonly draw from such experience. Nevertheless, we are logically duty bound to take our current experience and reasoning seriously, until and unless we personally come in contact with what allegedly lies beyond. Those of us who have not attained the noumenal may well be basically “ignorant” (as Buddhism says), but we would be foolish to deny our present experience and logic before such personal attainment.

Wisdom is an ongoing humble quest. An error many philosophers and mystics make is to crave for an

immediate and incontrovertible answer to all possible questions. They cannot accept human fallibility and the necessity to make do with it, by approximating over time towards truth. I suggest that even in the final realization we are obligated to evaluate our experience and decide what it is.

The phenomenological approach and inductive logic are thus a modest, unassuming method. The important thing is to remain lucid at all times, and not to get carried away by appearances, or worse still by fantasies. Even if one has had certain impressive meditation experiences, one should not lose touch with the rest of one's experience, but in due course carefully evaluate one's insights in a broader context. Logic is not an obstacle to truth, but the best way we have to ensure we do not foolishly stray away from reality. Rationality is wise.

## 16. The five skandhas doctrine

*Drawn from a yet to be published book, this essay was first posted in 2016 as a preview on the author's blog. Here, sections 1-2.*

In this essay, I critically comment on the Buddhist ‘five skandhas’ doctrine. This doctrine is attributed to the Buddha himself and considered as a core belief of Buddhism<sup>160</sup>. However, in my humble opinion, in view of its evident intellectual limitations, this doctrine should not be given such elevated status. Buddhism and its founder have much more intelligent ideas to offer the world. That being the case, the present critique of the five skandhas doctrine should not be taken as a general critique of Buddhism or its founder.

Although often listed in the literature, the five skandhas are rarely clearly defined and expounded on. The Sanskrit word *skandha* (Pali: *khanda*) means ‘aggregate’ – and apparently refers to a building-block, of the mind or perhaps of the world. In Sanskrit, the five skandhas listed are: *rupa, vedana, samjna, samskara, vijnana* (in Pali: *rupa, vedana, sanna, sankhara, vinnana*). In the dozens of English texts that I have read over the years, I have seen these terms translated in various ways, and with rare exceptions barely explained.

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<sup>160</sup> According to the Wikipedia article on this topic, the American Buddhist monk Thanissaro, in *Handful of Leaves*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed. 2006, p. 309, alleges that the Buddha “never defined a ‘person’ in terms of the aggregates” and that this doctrine is not pan-Buddhist. To my mind, if he said that (I have not seen it with my own eyes), he may well be right.

It is not made clear whether these terms are essentially phenomenological, psychological, metaphysical, ontological or epistemological. When interpretations are proposed, they differ considerably from one text to another. Nevertheless, this being an important doctrine in Buddhism, it is worth analyzing and evaluating.

## 1. My own phenomenological reading

Before studying the normative interpretations of these terms, permit me to present my own initial interpretations, even while admitting that they are largely inaccurate historically. That way, the reader will know where I am coming from, and will be better able to follow my thinking. When I first came across the five skandhas in Buddhist books, I took them to constitute a sort of *phenomenology*, i.e. a list of the different categories of being or appearance, one that suggests an ontological and epistemological theory insofar as the list distinguishes and interrelates the categories in certain ways. Consider the following reading:

- *Rupa*, usually translated as ‘form’, could be taken to refer to *the apparently external and material world*, which contains the phenomena of all shapes and sizes in motion that we seem to witness through our senses, the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. This field of experience is quantitatively overwhelming, and takes up most of our existence, but is of course not the whole story, not the whole of our world.
- *Vedana*, usually translated as ‘sensation or feeling’, could be taken to refer more specifically to *the phenomena we experience as within our personal body*. In a sense, these are part of the external and material world, since our body is apparently part of it; but in another sense, they are closer to home (i.e.

more internal) and less material (i.e. containing some phenomena notably different from those we experience further afield). In this context, our touch sensations of bodies beyond our own body are feelings, as are all the myriad physical sensations we experience within our bodies, such as sexual feelings (desire, satisfaction), digestive feelings (hunger, thirst, satiety, stomach aches, sensations when urinating or defecating, etc.), and feelings in other internal organs (headaches, heart beats, heartburn, muscular cramps, nerve pains, etc.). Here would also be included emotional reactions experienced within the body, such as love (a flutter or warmth in the heart region), fear (a flutter or warmth in the stomach region), etc. In short, all the pleasures and pains we may be subject to within our bodies, whether they stem from physical or mental causes. Also to be included under this heading would be our sensations of volition (acts of will), i.e. the sense we have that we move our body parts around and our whole body through space; and therefore also our sensations of velleity (pre-volitions, attitudes, intentions). Note however that, while volitions and intentions may have phenomenal aspects, they are largely non-phenomenal; i.e. they are intuited rather than perceived.

- *Samskara*, usually translated as ‘mental formations’, and sometimes as ‘impulses to volition’, could be taken to refer to *the inner phenomena we experience through our faculties of memory and imagination* (the latter being voluntary or involuntary manipulation of memory items to produce somewhat new images, sounds, etc.). This includes the images of visualizations, the sounds of verbal thoughts, dreams (during sleep) and

hallucinations (the latter being stronger projections, apparently into the space where matter resides, of imaginations). These phenomena resemble those experienced as external and material, in that they also have shape, color, sound, etc., and yet are experienced as substantially different, of a different ‘stuff’, so much so that we give them a different name (they are characterized as mental, as opposed to material), even if we do regard the mental phenomena, or phantasms, as derivatives of the material ones (through memory of experiences). Such mental phenomena obviously can and do condition (variously incite or otherwise affect) subsequent more overt actions.

- *Samjna*, usually translated as ‘perception’, but often as ‘appereception’, ‘conception’ or ‘cognition’, could be taken to refer to our various *objects of cognition*, i.e. whatever we intuit (non-phenomenal concretes), whatever we perceive apparently through the physical senses or mentally through memory and imagination (phenomenal concretes), and all the abstractions and theories (based on the preceding items) that we construct through conceptual insight and reasoning (including negation, similarity, dissimilarity, etc.). Thus, *samjna* would include our non-phenomenal impressions (appereceptions), our phenomenal experiences (perceptions), and the concepts and thoughts (conceptions) emerging from the preceding through which we get, not merely to experience things, but also to order and interrelate them, and thus to understand them (or be confused by them) to various degrees. Thus, note well, *samjna* focuses on objects in the context of their being cognized, i.e. as contents of cognition (and not as objects apart from cognition).

- *Vijnana*, usually translated as ‘consciousness’, could be taken to refer to *the fact of cognition*, the cognizing, as against its object (content), and its subject (the self apparently doing the cognizing). Consciousness has to be listed separately because it is substantially different from any of the other categories in our enumeration. Note well that, to assure a complete enumeration, this term in my view would have to include both the *relation of cognition* and the *apparent self or soul* which is related by it to the object. This refers to the self which we all routinely intuit – even though Buddhists deny the latter’s reality and consider it as illusory. This understanding is not entirely foreign to Buddhist practice, which tends to use the terms ‘consciousness’ and ‘mind’ in an ambiguous manner that sometimes really (though typically without frankly admitting it) intends the self (i.e. the one who is conscious)<sup>161</sup>. Moreover, it should be stressed that the self not only cognizes, but also wills and values – i.e. that *volition and valuation* are among its powers as well as cognition, and that these three faculties are interdependent and do not exist without each other.

That is to say in our present perspective: while *rupa* refers to external and material objects, *vedana* to more specifically bodily objects, and *samskara* to mental objects, and while *samjna* identifies these same categories of objects as contents of cognitive acts, *vijnana* refers to the implied knowing (and willing and

<sup>161</sup> I have often in my past writings pointed out the vagueness of the terms mind and consciousness in the discourse of Buddhist philosophers, and explained there how it allows them to get away with much fallacious reasoning.

valuing) acts and to the spiritual entities (ourselves) apparently engaged in them. From this we see that the various phenomenological categories here enumerated overlap somewhat: *rupa* includes at least part of *vedana*, *samskara* is a side-effect of *rupa* and *vedana*, *samjna* includes the preceding experiences and adds their more complex conceptual and rational products, while *vijnana* focuses on the subject and the relationship of consciousness (and volition and valuation) between it and these various concrete and abstract objects.<sup>162</sup>

The above phenomenological account is merely, to repeat, my personal projection: it is the way I have in the past tended to interpret the five skandhas doctrine in view of the terminology used for it in English. This is the way I, given my own philosophical background, would build a theory of knowledge and being if I was forced to use these five given terms, even while aware that such theory contains some non-orthodox perspectives.

## 2. A more orthodox psychological reading

However, Buddhists and other commentators present these terms in a rather different light. I will use as my springboard an interesting account I have seen on this topic by Caroline Brazier in *Buddhist Psychology*. Let

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<sup>162</sup> Note that in my listing, *samjna* is placed after *samskara*, which is not the usual order of listing. I could also have placed *samjna* after *vijnana*, since the latter category adds objects of cognition to be considered by the former. However, *vijnana* also has *samjna* as one of its objects, since the latter involves consciousness and a conscious subject; so the chosen order of presentation seems most logical.

us first look at this *psychological* approach, which I think is close to the original intent of the five skandhas doctrine, given that Buddhism is concerned with ‘enlightening and liberating’ people rather than with merely informing them to satisfy their curiosity. She writes:

“The skandhas are the stages in a process whereby the self-prison is created and maintained. At each stage, perception is infiltrated by personal agendas that create distortion. Delusion predominates.... Each of us continually seeks affirmation that we are that person who we have assumed ourselves to be. Situations that disturb this process are avoided or reinterpreted, and the self appears to become more substantial” (pp. 92-93).

Her exposition of the stages is as follows (summarily put, paraphrasing her). The first stage is *rupa*, which is finding indications of self in everything we come in contact with; i.e. grasping onto all sorts of things because they reinforce our belief in having a self, and indeed one with a specific identity we are attached to. Next in the process comes *vedana*, which refers to our immediate value-judgments in relation to things that we come across (people, events, whatever); we may find them attractive, repulsive or confusing – but in any case, we have a visceral reaction to them that affects our subsequent responses to them. Thirdly comes *samjna*, which consists in spinning further fantasies and thoughts around the things we have already encountered and initially reacted to; due to this, we are unconsciously carried off into certain habitual behavior-patterns. *Samskara* refers to these action and thought responses which we have, through repetitive past choices,

conditioned ourselves into doing almost automatically. Finally comes *vijnana*, which refers more broadly to the mentality (perspectives and policies) we adopt to ensure our self is well-endowed and protected in all circumstances.

These five stages constitute a vicious circle, in that the later stages affect and reinforce the earlier ones. They ensure that we enter and remain stuck in the cycle of birth, suffering and death. The important thing to note is that the purpose of this psychological description is to make us aware of the ways we ordinarily operate, so that we may over time learn to control and change those ways, and become enlightened and liberated. As Brazier puts it: “Buddhism is not a matter of just going with the flow. It is about changing course” (p. 95). In this approach, the skandhas doctrine is a practical rather than theoretical one. It is a ‘skillful means’, rather than an academic exposition. It is concerned with the ways we commonly form and maintain of our ‘self’.

Needless to say, this looks like a very penetrating and valuable teaching<sup>163</sup>. The question for us to ask at this point, however, is whether it is entirely correct. That is to say, assuming the above sketch is an accurate rendition of the Buddhist theory of human psychology, is this the way we ordinary (unenlightened, unliberated) human beings actually function? Brazier, being a committed Buddhist, takes this for granted rather uncritically. I would answer that though this theory seems partially correct, it is certainly not fully so. What we have here, at first sight, is a portrait of someone who is (very roughly put): very narrow-minded (*rupa*), instinctive (*vedana*), irrational (*samjna*), habitual

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<sup>163</sup> One that could be, and no doubt is, used in meditation.

(*samskara*), and selfish (*vijnana*). This may fully describe some people, and it may partly describe all of us, but it is certainly not a complete picture of the ordinary human psyche.

What is manifestly missing in this portrait are the higher faculties of human beings – their intelligence, their reason and their freewill. It could be argued that these higher faculties are present in the background, in the implication that people can (and occasionally do) become aware of their said lowly psychological behavior and make an effort to overcome it. But if so, this should be explicitly included in the description. That is to say, intelligence, reason and freewill should be presented as additional skandhas. But they are not so presented – it is not made clear that humans can function more wisely, and look at the facts of a situation objectively and intelligently, and decide through conscious reasoning how to best respond, and proceed with conscious volition to do so. In any case, these higher faculties are routinely used by most people, and not just used for the purpose of attaining enlightenment and liberation.

Why are these higher faculties, which are common enough, even if to varying degrees, not mentioned in the Buddhist account as integral factors of the human psyche? I would suggest that the main reason is that the self (or soul) has to be dogmatically kept out of it<sup>164</sup>. The

<sup>164</sup> It is interesting to note in passing how modern physicists, biologist, psychologists and philosophers tend to similarly studiously ignore the human soul and its functions of cognition, volition and valuation, in their respective accounts of the world, life and humanity. But whereas Buddhism's motive is to protect its dogma of no-self, the motive of modern 'scientists' is to protect their dogma of universal materialism and determinism. The intellectual sin

central pillar of the Buddhist theory of enlightenment and liberation is that our belief that we have a self is the deep cause of all our suffering, because a self is necessarily attached to its own existence, and the way out of this suffering is to realize that we do not really have a self and so do not need to attach to anything. In such a context, the human psyche must necessarily be described as essentially reactive and stupid, like a ship without a helmsman, at the mercy of every wind and current. Buddhism does regard humans as able to transcend these limitations, by following the ways and means taught by the Buddha in the Dharma; but it does not (in my opinion) fully clarify the psychological processes involved in self-improvement, no doubt due to the impossibility of verbally describing them with precision and generality.

Brazier does go on to describe how Buddhist psychology conceives transcending of the skandhas. She does so in terms of the ‘five omnipresent factors’ being transformed into ‘five rare factors’ “through spiritual practice.” But of course, that account does not clearly say *who* is doing the spiritual practice, and *what faculties* are involved. It does not acknowledge that the individual person involved (the self) has to realize (through intelligence and reason) the need for and way to such transformation, and then proceed to bring it about (through complex volitional thoughts and actions). The self and its higher faculties are not given due recognition (because, as already explained, such recognition would go against the Buddhist dogma of no-

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involved in both cases is to deliberately make things look simpler than they are so as to make them fit more easily into one’s pet theory.

self). This is not a fault found only in Brazier's account, but in all orthodox Buddhist accounts.

Understandably, Buddhism, particularly its Zen branch, rejects excessive intellectualism. Admittedly, intelligence, reason and freewill are all very well in principle, as tools for human betterment; but used in excess – or simply misused or abused – they can also and often do exacerbate human delusion and suffering. The intellect can be compulsively used to weave complex webs that distance its victim from reality rather than bring him or her closer to it. We can by such excess become more and more artificial and divorced from our true nature. Of that danger there is no doubt; it is observable. But intellectualism is surely not the whole story concerning our said higher faculties. Surely, they play a big role in improving our understanding and behavior, both in everyday life and in longer-term more intentionally spiritual pursuits.

Moreover, we have to ask whether the five skandhas doctrine, even taken at face value, is truly consistent. We are told that *rupa* consists in viewing things in relation to self rather than objectively, that *vedana* consists in immediate likes or dislikes, that *samjna* consists in making up associations, that *samskara* consists in conditioning, and that *vijnana* consists in selfish mentality – and it is all made to seem simple and mechanical. But is it? The Buddhist account itself tells us that these events are interrelated, i.e. stages in a process. Therefore, beneath each of them there must be complex mechanisms at play. *Rupa* must involve a certain sense of self and of its identity, to be able to select information of interest. *Vedana*, however instantaneous it may seem, cannot be immediate since it must be filtered through the subconscious scale of values of the person concerned. *Samjna* presupposes that there are older mental contents to which it

associates new mental contents. *Samskara* refers to habits, which imply programming by repetition. And *vijnana* in turn implies storage of information and of valuations.

Furthermore, even if we grant that the five skandhas reflect common *tendencies* within the human psyche, it is introspectively evident that normally the self can in fact, at every one of these stages, intervene through free will based on rational considerations and conscious valuations. That is to say, faced with the ego-centrality of *rupa*, we can still choose to view things more objectively; faced with thoughtless valuations of *vedana*, we can still choose to evaluate things in a more balanced manner; faced with wild associations of *samjna*, we can still choose to put things in context more accurately; faced with our bad *samskara* habits, we can still choose to resist temptations or overpower resistances; faced with native *vijnana* selfishness, we can still choose to act with larger perspectives in mind. The human psyche is not a mechanical doll, driven by forces beyond control – there is a responsible soul at its center, able (whether immediately or gradually) to impose its will on the rest of the psyche. Buddhists cannot consistently deny all this, since they do believe in and advocate self-improvement, as the Noble Eightfold Path makes clear.

### 3. A plainly mechanistic thesis

This brings us to the crux of the matter, the *determinism* tacitly involved in the five skandhas doctrine. The skandhas are imagined by Buddhists as *dharmas*, i.e. as “a series of consecutive impersonal momentary events,”

as Vasubandhu put it<sup>165</sup>. No one is making them happen, they just happen each one caused by the ones preceding it and causing the ones succeeding it. They do not happen to someone, either, even if they seem to. They are “linked to suffering,” but no one suffers them. Clearly, there is logically no room, in this conception of psychological processes, for a person actually cognizing, understanding, evaluating, reasoning, deciding, choosing and engaging in action. Not only is the person removed, but the acts of cognition, valuation and volition are also removed. They are reduced to mere momentary electrical disturbances in the mental cloud<sup>166</sup>, as it were. They are no longer special *relations* between a subject or author and other things in the mind or body. This doctrine is, really, crass reification of things that are definitely not entities.

The five skandhas is clearly a mechanistic thesis, even if it is mitigated in a subterranean manner by the Buddhist faith in the possibility of enlightenment and

<sup>165</sup> Quoted or paraphrased (not clear which) in *Buddhist Scriptures*, edited by Edward Conze. Vasubandhu was a Buddhist monk and major philosopher, fl. 4th to 5th cent. CE in Ghandara (a kingdom located astride modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan). His philosophical posture is today normative, at least among the Mahayana, but it was opposed by a Hinayana school called the Personalists, which lasted for many centuries as of 300 BCE and involved a good many monks (e.g. an estimated 30% of India's 200,000 monks in the 7<sup>th</sup> cent.). See pp. 190-197.

<sup>166</sup> Modern ‘scientists’ (I put the word in inverted commas deliberately, to signify criticism) would say much the same, but would place the electrical disturbances on the more physical plane of the brain and nervous system. The idea that the mind is a sort of very sophisticated computer is untenable, for exactly the same reasons that the idea of skandhas is untenable.

liberation. In this view, logically, such spiritual attainment is itself merely the product of a chain of impersonal mental events, with no one initiating them and no one profiting from them<sup>167</sup>. This state of affairs is claimed to be known by means ‘deep meditation’, although it is not made clear who is doing the meditating, nor by means of what faculties or for what useful purpose. Clearly, objectively, however deep such meditation it could not possibly guarantee the verity of the alleged insights, but must needs submit them to logical evaluation in accord with the laws of thought. Scientific thought cannot accept any deep insights, or any revelations based on them, at face value; it demands rational assessment of all claims.

In truth, granting that there is some truth to the psychological processes described by the skandhas doctrine, they must be viewed more restrictively as processes of *ego*-building, rather than so radically as processes of *self*-invention. They refer, not to ways that ‘we’ (a never explained yet still repeatedly used grammatical subject) imagine the self or soul to exist, but to ways that we (the truly existing soul, our real self) construct and maintain a particular *self-image* that we think flattering or securing. What is evident in honest, non-dogmatic meditation is that, while such processes

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<sup>167</sup> One Victoria Lavorerio, in a paper called “The self in Buddhism,” has written: “If following Descartes we say that where there is a thought there is a thinker, the Buddhist would respond ‘where there is a thought, there is a thought’.” While rather witty, this statement is of course inane, since its author does not grasp the logical absurdities of the Buddhist no-soul thesis (and that, even though she quotes a couple of arguments of mine regarding them), but merely seeks to position herself fashionably. See her essay here: [http://www.academia.edu/1489808/The\\_self\\_in\\_Buddhism](http://www.academia.edu/1489808/The_self_in_Buddhism).

can surely *influence* our mental and physical behavior, i.e. make things easier or more difficult for us, they do not normally *determine* it. An influence, however strong, can always (with the appropriate attitude and effort) be overcome. At almost every moment of our existence, we remain free to choose to resist these mental forces or to give in to them. If we but make the effort to be aware, to judge and to intervene as well as we can, we remain or become effective masters of our fate.

It is only because we indeed exist as individuals, and have these powers of cognition, valuation and volition, that we can observe, identify, understand and overcome the impersonal forces described by the five skandhas doctrine. Therefore, in fact, the said doctrine, far from constituting an exhaustive listing of the basic building blocks of the human psyche, at best depicts just some surface aspects of much more complicated events and structures. Not only is the list incomplete in that it lacks overt reference to the human self and its higher faculties, but additionally its presentation of the five lower faculties (even assuming that these five faculties indeed exist) is rather superficial. For all the above reasons, and yet others, I view the five skandhas account of human psychology as deficient.

As regards enlightenment, liberation and wisdom, these are impossible without a soul and its faculties of cognition, volition and valuation. Enlightenment means perfect cognition by the soul, i.e. a consciousness as high, wide and deep and accurate as can be for the person concerned. Liberation means perfect volition by the soul, i.e. a will as free of obstructions and as powerful as can be for the person concerned. Wisdom means perfect valuation by the soul, meaning full understanding of good and bad coupled with behavior that is accordingly fully virtuous and non-vicious.

Enlightenment, liberation and wisdom are concepts only applicable to sentient beings (notably to humans and other animals, and perhaps in some sense to plants); they are irrelevant to non-spiritual entities (i.e. material and/or mental entities devoid of soul, such as skandhas, computers or fantasy creatures).

## 17. The five skandhas doctrine (cont'd)

*Drawn from a yet to be published book, this essay was first posted in 2016 as a preview on the author's blog. Here, sections 3-4.*

### 1. The metaphysical aspects

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (EB) defines the skandhas as “the five elements that sum up the whole of an individual’s mental and physical existence.” It lists them as “(1) matter, or body, the manifest form of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water; (2) sensations, or feelings; (3) perceptions of sense objects; (4) mental formations; and (5) awareness, or consciousness, of the other three mental aggregates [i.e. items 2-4].”

In most accounts I have seen, this theory is presented as descriptive of what constitutes a person. Some accounts I have seen, however, apply it more broadly, viewing the five skandhas as the constituents of the phenomenal world. In any case, this theory clearly contains an ontological thesis, insofar as it acknowledges two kinds of phenomena, the material (the first skandha) and the mental (the other four skandhas)<sup>168</sup>. Moreover, note in passing, since the above definition mentions the ‘four

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<sup>168</sup> I assume that the Yogacara, Mind-Only, school would advocate that matter is a sort of mental phenomenon. In that case, they would presumably advocate that the skandhas theory concerns not only personality but the whole phenomenal world.

elements', it includes a physical theory, one admittedly very vague and by today's standards rather useless<sup>169</sup>. Secondly, the skandhas doctrine has some epistemological implications, in that it identifies sensations or feelings, perception of sense objects, and so on – implying our ability to know *of* such things, presumably by introspection.

Furthermore, the said source (EB) explains that "The self (or soul) cannot be identified with any one of the parts, nor is it the total of the parts. All individuals are subject to constant change, as the elements of consciousness are never the same, and man may be compared to a river, which retains an identity, though the drops of water that make it up are different from one moment to the next." This statement is the metaphysical element in the skandhas doctrine, since it involves important claims regarding the ultimate nature of individuals (i.e. persons, people).

This explanation reminds us that *the philosophical motive* of the skandhas doctrine is to buttress the Buddhist claim that we have no self or soul (*anatta*). According to this doctrine, we are only clusters of the

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<sup>169</sup> It is worth noting, of course, that the fact that this simplistic, though ancient and widespread, theory of physics (with reference to the 'elements' of earth, air, fire and water, or similar concepts) is advocated by Buddhism is proof that this doctrine is not the product of any 'omniscience'. If the Buddha indeed formulated it or accepted it, he cannot be said to have been 'omniscient' since this is not an accurate account of the physical world. This being the case, it is permitted to also doubt he was 'omniscient' in his understanding of the mental or spiritual world. Of course, it could be argued that he appealed to the four elements theory only because it was commonly accepted in his day, in the way of a 'skillful means', without intending to endorse it.

listed five material and mental phenomena, which are in constant flux, unfolding as a succession of events, each new event being caused by those before it and causing those after it. It is stressed that none of the skandhas is the self, and neither is their sum the self. The self is not something apart from them, either. What we call the self is a mere illusion, due to our conflating these ongoing, causally-linked events and giving them a name.

The no-self idea is usually expressed by saying that the human being is ‘empty of self’. This is presented as one aspect of a wider metaphysical doctrine of ultimate ‘emptiness’ (*shunyata*), applicable to all things in the phenomenal world. Initially, I suggest, Buddhist thought sought to *replace* the self we all naturally assume we have with the five skandhas. Since the doctrine of ultimate emptiness needed to be applied to the apparent self, an explanation of apparent selfhood was provided through the doctrine of the five skandhas. The self does not really exist; it is only made to appear to exist due to the play and interplay of the five skandhas. However, consistency required that the five skandhas be empty *too*. This was later acknowledged, for instance, in *The Heart of the Prajnaparamita Sutra*, which stated:

“Form is emptiness, emptiness is form... The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.”<sup>170</sup>

Here, the five skandhas, thanks to which the self seems to us to exist even though it is in fact empty, are *affirmed*

<sup>170</sup> Given in full in Thich Nhat Hanh’s *The Heart of Understanding*.

*to be empty too*, note well. All phenomenal existents are empty, and this includes the skandhas too. The question might then well be asked (by me, at least): *if the skandhas are equally empty, what ideological need have we of them? Why can we not just as well admit the existence of the self or soul, and call it ‘empty’ too, directly?* This is of course a significant flaw in the doctrine of the skandhas – it shows the idea of them to be *logically redundant*. If the motive behind it was to explain the emptiness of self, it was not only unnecessary but useless, since the emptiness of skandhas also had to be admitted! Logically, far from simplifying things, the skandhas hypothesis complicated them.

In other words, the Heart Sutra could equally well have stated: “self is emptiness, and emptiness is self;” or even: “soul is emptiness, and emptiness is soul.” And indeed, it could be argued that soul, being more insubstantial (less phenomenal) than the skandhas, is closer to emptiness than the skandhas are.

## 2. Soul and emptiness

There are obviously two concepts here to clarify – (a) soul and (b) emptiness. Additionally, we must (c) examine their interrelation.

(a) The term **soul** refers to an entity of spiritual substance, i.e. of a substance other than the substances that material or mental things seem to have. Soul has no phenomenal characteristics – no shape or color, no sound, no flavor, no odor, no hardness or softness, no heat or cold, etc. That is to say, it cannot be cognized by external perception (using the five sense organs) or by internal perception (using the proverbial mind’s eye,

and its analogues, the mind's ear, etc.). This does not mean it cannot be cognized by some other, appropriate means – which we can refer to as *apperception* or *intuition*.

Just because the soul is not phenomenal, *it does not follow* that it does not exist. Buddhists apparently cannot understand this line of reasoning. In the West, David Hume (Scotland, 1711-76) evidently had the same problem. Looking into himself, he could only perceive images and thoughts, but no soul. Obviously, if you look for something in the wrong place or in the wrong way, you won't find it. If you look for something non-phenomenal in a field of phenomena, you won't find it. If you look for color with your ears or for sound with your nose, you won't find them. To look for the soul, you just need to be intuitively aware. All of us are constantly self-aware, even though we cannot precisely pinpoint where that self is. There is no need for advanced meditation methods to be aware of one's soul – it is a common, routine occurrence.

Note well that I am not affirming like René Descartes (France, 1596-1650) that soul is known through some sort of *inference*, namely the famous *cogito ergo sum*, i.e. "I think therefore I am." We obviously can and do know *about* the soul through such rational means, i.e. through abstract theorizing – but our primary and main source of knowledge *of* the soul is through direct personal *experience*, which may be referred to as apperception or intuition. So, my approach is not exclusively rationalist, but largely empiricist. In this, note well, my doctrine of the soul differs radically from the Cartesian – as well as from the Buddhist.

According to Buddhist dogma, one cannot perceive the soul in meditation; if one observes attentively one only finds various mental phenomena (the five skandhas, to be exact). But I reply that the soul is manifestly a *non-*

*phenomenal* object and should not be conflated with such overt phenomena. We all have a more or less distinct ‘sense of self’ most if not all of the time, without need of meditation.

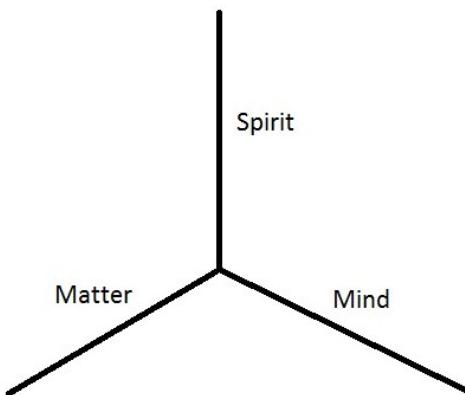
This is obvious from the very fact that everyone understands the word ‘self’. Buddhism admits this sense of self, but absurdly – quite dogmatically – takes it to be ‘illusory’. Having at the outset dismissed this significant ‘sense’ (intuition) as irrelevant, it is not surprising that it cannot find the soul (i.e. the human self) in the midst of the phenomena of mind (the five skandhas)! Note this well – **Buddhism has no credible argument to back its no-soul thesis.** It *begs the question*, calling the sense of self illusory because it believes there is no self, and claiming that it knows by introspection that there is no self while rejecting offhand the ordinary experience of self we all have. As a result of this manifest error of reasoning, if not outright doctrinaire dishonesty, Buddhism becomes embroiled in many logical absurdities.

Just as one would not look for visual phenomena with one’s hearing faculty or for auditory phenomena with one’s visual faculty, so it is absurd to look for spiritual things (the soul, and its many acts of consciousness, will and valuation) with one’s senses or by observing mental phenomena. Each kind of appearance has its appropriate organ(s) of knowledge. For spiritual things, only intuition (or apperception) is appropriate.

To understand how the soul can exist apparently in midst of the body and mind (i.e. of bodily and mental phenomena) and yet be invisible, inaudible, etc. (i.e. non-phenomenal), just imagine a three-dimensional space (see illustration below). Say that two dimensions represent matter and mind and the third applies to spirit. Obviously, the phenomena of mind will not be found in the matter dimension, or vice versa. Similarly, the soul

cannot be found in the dimensions of matter and/or mind, irrespective of how much you look for it there. Why? Simply because its place is elsewhere – in the spiritual dimension, which is perpendicular to the other two. Thus, it is quite legitimate to claim awareness of the soul even while admitting that it has no phenomenal (matter-mind) characteristics.

Figure 4. Matter, mind and spirit presented as three dimensions of existence



Note well that *the above illustration of the spiritual as located in another dimension is intended as merely figurative, and not to be taken literally, because the concept of dimensions is itself a material-mental concept based on the perception and projection of space*. Even the idea of time as a fourth dimension relative to the three dimensions of space is mere analogy; all the more so, the idea of spirit as a further dimension (or maybe a set of dimensions) is somewhat artificial. The simple truth is that **spirit cannot really**

**or fully be expressed in material or mental terms, being so very different, truly *sui generis*.** We might likewise object to the image of mind as a distinct dimension (or set of them) in comparison to matter, but mind does have some phenomenal characteristics in common with matter whereas spirit cannot be said to be at all phenomenal. So, to repeat, the above analysis of these three domains with reference to dimensions is *merely a convenient metaphor*.

Furthermore, it would be epistemologically quite legitimate to claim the existence of soul on purely abstract, conceptual grounds. This is justifiable with reference to the principles of adduction. One can hypothesize an entity, if such assumption serves to explain various observable concrete phenomena. In the case of soul, the ‘phenomena’ involved are our commonplace experiences of cognition, volition and valuation. These experiences are largely intuitive too, but they make their manifest mark in the fields of mind and body. We experience cognition whenever we perceive or conceive anything. We experience volition whenever we think or do anything. We experience valuation whenever we like or dislike anything. Soul explains all these experiences by means of a central entity. This is akin to, say, in astronomy, discovering a planet invisible to our telescopes by observing the displacement of other celestial bodies around it. This is inductive logic.

But in truth, soul is not a mere abstraction; it is a concrete (though spiritual) thing that can be cognized directly using our inner faculty of intuition, to repeat. One error Buddhists make is to confuse entity and essence. The claim of a soul is not a claim of essence, but of entity. The soul is not the essence of the body, or even of the body-mind complex – it is a distinct entity that resides, somehow, in the midst of these phenomena,

and affects them and is influenced (and perhaps also affected) by them, but does not have the same nature as them. It is a substance, but a very different and insubstantial substance, as already pointed out. Indeed, to call soul an entity or substance is really just *metaphor* – analogical thinking. In truth, soul is so different from the other constituents of the world that it can only be described by means of analogy – it cannot really be reduced to anything else we know of.

We can see the said philosophical error made, for instance, in the *Milinda-panha*, a non-canonical but orthodox Theravada (Pali) text<sup>171</sup>. Here, Milinda questions Nagasena, after the latter claims not to really exist. He asks him very pertinent questions such as who, then, is it that eats, engages in spiritual practices, keeps morality, gains merit, etc. The latter replies by giving the example of a chariot, pointing out that no part of the chariot can be considered as the chariot, nor even the combination of all the parts. Milinda, whose questions were excellent, is very easily taken in by Nagasena's answers. But (to my mind) we need not be.

For a start, a chariot cannot be considered as analogous to a person. We do not look upon a chariot as like a person, for the simple reason that it does not have capacities of cognition, volition and valuation. To look for the analogue of a soul in a chariot is to commit the red herring fallacy. Moreover, while it is true that a

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<sup>171</sup> See Conze, pp. 147-151. The dialogue is given in full here. Milinda (Gk. Menander) was the “Greek ruler of a large Indo-Greek empire [namely Bactria] in the late 2nd century BC.” Nagasena was a senior Buddhist monk. The text was, according to EB, “composed in northern India in perhaps the 1st or 2nd century AD (and possibly originally in Sanskrit) by an unknown author.”

chariot contains no ‘core entity’ which can be so called, and it is true that no one part or combination of its parts can be used to define it, it still has an ‘essence’. A chariot, as a man-made object, is defined by means of its purpose or utility – as a horse-drawn carriage, used for transport and travel, especially in war or hunting or racing. Its essence is an *abstraction*, not a concrete entity. Certainly, all the required parts must be there to form a functioning chariot, but these parts can be changed at will for other parts *like them* (though not for other parts unlike them: e.g. one cannot replace a wheel with a shoe). The one constant in it is the said abstract purpose or utility.<sup>172</sup>

The same reasoning does not apply to persons, obviously. So, Nagasena’s argument was in fact beside the point. As already mentioned, a soul is not an essence, but a core (spiritual) entity. It therefore cannot be viewed as one of the five skandhas, nor as the sum of those skandhas, as the Buddhists rightly insist. It can, however, contrary to Buddhist dogma, be viewed as one of the parts of the complete person, namely the spiritual part; but more precisely, it should be viewed as the core entity, i.e. as the specific part that exclusively gives the whole a personality, or selfhood. This is especially true if we start wondering where our soul came from when we were born, whether it continues to exist after we die, where it goes if it does endure, whether it is perishable, and so forth.

This brings us to the question as to *whether the soul is eternal or temporary*, or (in more Western terminology) whether the soul is immortal or mortal. Eternal would

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<sup>172</sup> Similarly, a river, though not man-made, can be defined by means of abstractions. This is said with reference to the analogy proposed by EB earlier on.

mean that it has existed since the beginning of time and will exist till the end of time. Temporary would mean any shorter period of time, though it may be very long indeed. Temporary could mean as long as the current body lives, or it could mean for many lifetimes – and that with or without physical bodies.

It seems that Indian philosophy had no place for temporary souls, only eternal souls or no-souls – with regard to soul, it was all or nothing<sup>173</sup>. However, this disjunction is philosophically untenable. It is conceivable that the soul is an epiphenomenon of the living human (and more broadly animal, or at least higher animal) body, which comes into existence with it and ceases to exist when it does. Or it may be that this temporary soul lasts longer, transmigrating from body to body or maybe existing without a body. We do not know (at least, I don't); but what is sure is that these are conceptual possibilities that cannot be ignored. Certainly, non-Buddhist humanity has found them conceivable, since many religions are based on such alternative beliefs.

As regards the eternal soul, the question is whether such a soul can or cannot be liberated from the (alleged) cycle of birth and death. Does eternity of the soul logically imply its eternal imprisonment in suffering? I do not see why. It is conceivable that the eternal soul was once happy, then somehow fell into suffering, but can still pull itself out of its predicament through spiritual practices. It may well be, even, that its liberation depends on a spiritual program like the Four Noble

<sup>173</sup> For instance, in the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita, the *atman* (individual soul) is said by Krishna to be: “unborn, undying; never ceasing, never beginning; deathless, birthless; unchanging for ever.” (*The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita.*)

Truths of Buddhism; i.e. on realizing that it is in a vicious circle of suffering, that this suffering is caused by attachment and can be cured by non-attachment, and that such non-attachment can be cultivated through the Noble Eightfold Path. So, there is nothing inherently contradictory to Buddhism in the assertion of an eternal soul. I am not advocating this, only pointing out that it can consistently be advocated contrary to established dogma.

What is sure, in any case, is that the no-soul idea is logically untenable. Buddhists have never squarely faced the logical problems it raises and honestly tried to solve them. They are always inhibited by the fear of being regarded by their peers as heretical holders of ‘false views’; so, they keep repeating the no-soul catechism and keep trying to justify it (using absurd means such as the tetralemma, which puts forward the nutty idea that something can both be and not-be, or that something can both not-be and not-not-be). The use of the five skandhas doctrine as an explanation of the (alleged) illusion of selfhood simply does not convince any honest observer, as above shown. Buddhist preachers say that individuals should not take Buddhism on faith, but try and think the issues through for themselves, and they will see the logic of it. But when someone does so, and comes to a different conclusion and rejects one of their clichés, they are nonplussed if not hostile.

The truth is that it is impossible to formulate a credible theory of the human psyche without admitting the existence of a soul at its center. *Someone* has to be suffering and wanting to escape from suffering. A machine-like entity cannot suffer and cannot engage in spiritual practices to overcome suffering. Spiritual practice means, and can only mean, practice by a spiritual entity, i.e. a soul with powers of cognition,

volition and valuation. These powers cannot be equated electrical signals in the brain, or to events in the skandhas. They are *sui generis*, very miraculous and mysterious things, not reducible to mechanical processes. Cognition without consciousness *by a subject* (a cognizing entity) is a contradiction in terms; volition without a freely willing *agent* (an actor or doer) is a contradiction in terms; valuation without *someone at risk* (who stands to gain or lose something) is a contradiction in terms. This is not mere grammar; it is logic.

An important question as regards the soul is whether it is the same throughout its existence, or alternatively it spiritually changes (for better or worse) over time. This issue is important as it could affect responsibility, and reward or punishment (karma, in Buddhism). Granting that the soul is responsible for its acts of will *at the time* of such actions, is it just for the soul to receive the consequences of such actions *at a later time*? Should I pay in my old age for the vices of my youth that I no longer indulge in, or get the belated rewards for my youthful virtues even if I no longer have them? If the soul is unchanging through time, the answer would obviously be yes. But if the soul does evolve or devolve over time, the answer might at first sight seem negative. Can it still be said that *the same person* involved in such case?

Different solutions to this problem might be proposed. First, we should emphasize that much of the karmic load (for good or bad) of our lives is placed in our mental and bodily dimensions, our mind and body. The question here posed is whether some of the karmic load is placed in our spiritual dimension, our soul. If we say that the soul is constant, we must place all apparent spiritual changes related to it in its mental and physical environment. Thus, the same soul as a baby has more

limited powers of walking, talking, etc.; as an adult, his intellectual and bodily powers reach their peak; in old age, they gradually deteriorate.

Moreover, if one thinks and acts in a saintly manner, one is likely to have a pleasant inner life and probably outer life too; whereas, if one thinks and acts in a depraved manner, one is likely to have an unpleasant inner life and probably outer life too. But what of in some supposed afterlife, when the soul is without body or mind? The choices a person makes at any given time reflect its total circumstances at that time. If I am the same across time, then in principle if I were put back in the same circumstances I would react the same way to them. This would seem contrary to the principle of free will, which is that whatever the surrounding influences the soul remains free to choose – and is therefore ultimately unpredictable.

A better position to adopt may be that proposed by Buddhism in the context of the five skandhas doctrine. I am referring to ‘the Burden Sutra’ expounded by Vasubandhu<sup>174</sup>:

“The processes which have taken place in the past cause suffering in those which succeed them. The preceding Skandhas are therefore called the ‘burden’, the subsequent ones its ‘bearer’ [of the burden].”

We could adapt the same idea to the soul (instead of the skandhas), and say that since its present existence is caused by its past existence, it is in a real sense at all times a continuation of its past, carrying on not only its

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<sup>174</sup> In Conze, again (p. 195).

existence but also its good and bad karma. In this way, even if the soul (the ‘bearer’) has undergone inner changes, it remains responsible for its past deeds (the ‘burden’). The past becomes cumulatively imbedded in the present and future. In that case, we must ask the question: what changes are possible within a soul? Is it not a unitary thing? Can it conceivably have parts? This would seem to take us back full circle to a psychological description, such as the one proposed in the five skandhas theory!

However, I would suggest that such questions are not appropriate in the spiritual realm, which is not quite comparable to the material and mental realms. The soul, being non-phenomenal, cannot be thought of as having size or shape or even exact location, or as increasing or decreasing in content – these concepts and others like them being drawn from the phenomenal realms. We should rather accept that we cannot describe the soul, any more than we can truly fathom its ultimate workings. Just as cognition, volition and valuation are *sui generis* world-events, so is the soul too special to fit into any simplistic analogies.

It should be added that the view of the soul here proposed is not very far, in many respects, from the Buddhist notion of Buddha-nature. Consider the following brilliant statements by Son Master Chinul<sup>175</sup>:

“The material body is temporal, having birth and death. The real mind is like space, unending and unchanging....

The material body is a compound of four elements, earth water, fire, and air. Their

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Korea, 1158-1210.

substance is insentient; how can they perceive or cognize? That which can perceive and cognize has to be your Buddha-nature....

In the eyes, it is called seeing. In the ears, it is called hearing.... In the hands, it grabs and holds. In the feet, it walks and runs.... Perceptives [sic] know this is the Buddha-nature, the essence of enlightenment. Those who do not know call it the soul....

Since it has no form, could it have size? Since it has no size, could it have bounds? Because it has no bounds, it has no inside or outside. Having no inside or outside, it has no far or near. With no far or near, there is no there or here. Since there is no there or here, there is no going or coming. Because there is no going or coming, there is no birth or death. Having no birth or death, it has no past or present....”<sup>176</sup>

Clearly, the “real mind” which is “like space,” the “Buddha-nature” which alone can “perceive and cognize,” that which sees and hears and grabs and walks, i.e. that which is the Subject of acts of consciousness and the Author of volitional acts, corresponds to what we commonly call the soul, even if the said writer refuses to “call it the soul.” It is noteworthy that, despite the Buddhist dogma that cognitive and volitional acts do not imply a self, this writer seems to advocate that they do (even while virtuously denying selfhood). Is then the difference between these concepts merely verbal? I would say not. The idea of the soul suggests individuation (in some

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<sup>176</sup> 424. *Classics of Buddhism and Zen*, vol. 1. Pp. 417-419,

realistic sense), whereas that of Buddha-nature has a more universal connotation (with apparent individuality regarded as wholly illusory).

(b) Let us now examine the Buddhist concept of *Emptiness*. Note at the outset that I make no claim to higher consciousness, and have no interest in engaging in fanciful metaphysical speculations using big words. I write as a logical philosopher, an honest ordinary man intent on finding the truth without frills. By ‘emptiness’, most Buddhists do not mean literal vacuity, or a void (non-existence). It may be that some Hinayana thinkers understood the term that way, but I gather Mahayana thinkers viewed it more positively (or ambiguously) as referring to ‘neither existence nor non-existence’. The latter expression is meant to reject both excessive belief in the existence of the phenomenal world (Eternalism) and excessive belief in the non-existence of the phenomenal world (Nihilism). It is intended as a golden mean – a ‘middle way’.

However, as regards this concept of ‘middle way’, it is inaccurate (quite muddle-headed, in fact) to say, as Buddhists do, that this emptiness is ‘non-dualistic’, suggesting that it literally *includes* all opposites, i.e. allows of effective contradiction. All that can be said is that emptiness comprises everything that is positively *actual*, whether in the past, present or future. Just as actuals are never contradictory, i.e. just as contradiction never occurs in reality at any time or place (not even, upon reflection, in the mind), so emptiness does not admit of contradictions. Contradiction is certainly illusory, and any claim to it is necessarily false. ‘Non-dualistic’ must be taken to mean (more accurately) unitary, undifferentiated. It refers to the actual positive, not to any imagined negative.

Often, it is implied that Emptiness corresponds to the Absolute, the Infinite, Ultimate Reality, the Original or Primordial ground of Being, or of Mind, the One, Nothingness, the Noumenon, and so forth. This concept, and some of the terminology used for it, are of course not entirely foreign to other philosophies and religions.

From its Pre-Socratic beginnings, Greek philosophy has sought for the underlying unity of the many, what lies beneath the variegated phenomenal world, the common ground of all things we commonly experience, from whence things presumably come and to which they presumably go (as it were). These ideas culminated in Neo-Platonism in late Antiquity, and returned to Western philosophy in the late Middle Ages and in the Renaissance in various contexts. Comparable notions are also found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and of course in other Indian religions, notably Hinduism – especially in their respective more mystical undercurrents. Greek philosophy has of course influenced these various religions, and they have also demonstrably influenced each other, in this respect. There has also no doubt been influences from and to Buddhism, as the above mentioned *Milinda-panha* attests, being a dialogue between a Greek king and a Buddhist monk.

With regard to our bodies, or to matter in general, it is often argued that though they appear varyingly ‘substantial’ (including gases and liquids with solids), if we go deeper into their composition, as we nowadays can, we shall find mostly empty space, with only very rare particles of mass, which are just pockets of energy anyway, connected by insubstantial fields of force. But the obvious reply to that is that this would still not be total void; i.e. even if matter is not as full and substantial as it at first appears, that does not mean that there is nothing in it *at all*.

Nevertheless, I do not think that the Buddhist concept of emptiness applied to matter refers to this empty space with very rare substantiality. Rather, I think that it refers to the assumed universal and unitary common ground of all things, which is conceivable as *pure existence*, *prior to any differentiation* into distinct entities, characteristics or events. This root existent cannot be described or localized, because to do so would be to ascribe to it some specific character or location to the exclusion of another.

With regard to mental phenomena, by which I mean the stuff of memories and derived phantasms, which apparently occur our heads, they seem much less substantial than material ones, but nevertheless they are *phenomenal* insofar as we perceive them as having colors, shapes, sounds, and perhaps also (though I can't say I am sure of it) also odors, flavors and feelings of touch. We must also in this context pay attention to concrete feelings and emotions which appear to occur in our bodies or heads, which we would collectively classify as touch-sensations.

It is worth noting the importance touch-sensations play in our view of matter: the 'solidity' we ascribe to matter is defined in terms of the resistance we *experience* when we push it, pull it or squeeze it, as well as with regard to the evident *relative* duration of the object at hand. No matter how much empty interspace matter may in fact contain, the experience of solidity (to various degrees) remains, and strongly determines our sense of 'materiality'. Mental phenomena, in this context, appear far less 'solid' than material ones, being able to dissolve more quickly and to be relatively more malleable (and in some respects less so). The Buddhist adjective 'empty' should not be taken to mean 'devoid of solidity', for solidity (as just explained) is a

*phenomenological* given and therefore cannot be denied.

Additionally, in my view, we must take into consideration, as mental ‘phenomena’ in an expanded sense (more precisely, ‘appearances’), objects of intuition like self, consciousness, volition and valuation, even though they are quite *non-phenomenal*, i.e. devoid of color, shape, sound, etc. All these existents can also, and all the more so, be regarded as empty, if we understand the concept correctly as above suggested.

According to Buddhism, this root and foundation of all existence, which is somewhat immanent as well as transcendental, can be known through meditation, or at any rate when such meditation attains its goal of enlightenment. In this, Buddhism differs from Kantian philosophy, which views the noumenal realm as in principle unattainable by the human cognitive apparatus (even though Kant<sup>177</sup> evidently claimed, merely by formulating his theory, quite paradoxically, to at least know *of* it).

Nevertheless, the two agree on many points, such as the characterization of the phenomenal realm as illusory while the noumenal is real. What is clear is that emptiness refers to a universal and unitary substratum, which is eminently calm and quiet, and yet somehow houses and even produces all the multiplicity and motion we perceive on our superficial plane. The world of phenomena rides on the noumenal like ocean waves ride on the ocean. Water and waves are essentially one and the same, yet they are distinguishable by abstraction; likewise, with regard to the noumenal and phenomenal.

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Immanuel Kant (Germany, 1724-1804).

Mention should be made here of the Buddhist theory of *the codependence or interdependence of all dharmas*. According to this theory, everything is caused by everything else; nothing is capable of standing alone. That precisely is why everything (i.e. all things in the world of phenomena) may be said to be empty – because it has no ‘own being’ (*svabhava*). This means that not only we humans, and all sentient beings, are empty of self, but even plants and inanimate entities are empty. This may sound conceivable at first blush, but the notion of interdependence does not stand serious logical scrutiny. The claim that everything is a cause of everything is a claim that there is at least a partial, contingent causative relation between literally *any two* things. But such causative relation must needs be somewhat exclusive to exist at all<sup>178</sup>. So, the idea put forward by Buddhist philosophers is in fact fallacious, a ‘stolen concept’.

It should also be said that the term ‘emptiness’, insofar as it is intended negatively, i.e. as indicative of *privation of existence*, is necessarily *conceptual*. We can say that being comes from and returns to non-being, but it must be acknowledged that this is something that cannot be known by direct experience, whether ordinary or meditative, but only by conceptual insight. The simple reason for this is that negation cannot be an object of perception or intuition, but can only be known by *inductive inference* from an unsuccessful search for something positive<sup>179</sup>. Only positives can be experienced. All negative terms are, logically, necessarily conceptual; indeed, negation is one of the

<sup>178</sup> See my *The Logic of Causation*, chapter 16.3, for a full refutation.

<sup>179</sup> See my *Ruminations*, chapter 9.

foundations of conceptual thought. Thus, any claim that one has *purely experienced*, in the most profound levels of contemplation, the Nothingness at the root of Existence, is not credible: reasoning (even if wordless) was surely involved.

For Buddhism, the original ground is something impersonal, though some might view it as a sort of pantheism. For the above mentioned major religions, the original ground is identified with God. In my opinion, such identification is more credible, because I do not see how the conscious, willful, and valuing individual soul could emerge from something greater that is not itself essentially conscious, willful, and valuing. These faculties being higher than impersonal nature, their ultimate source must potentially have them too. In Jewish kabbalah, for instance, the human soul is viewed as a spark of the Divine Soul (a chip off the old block as it were). We are in God's image and likeness in that, like Him, we have soul, cognition, volition and valuation, although to an infinitesimal degree in comparison to His omniscience, omnipotence and all-goodness. But in any case, it is clear that there is some considerable agreement between the various philosophies and religions.

(c) Let us now consider soul *in the context of* emptiness. Is the concept of self or soul logically compatible, or (as the Buddhists claim) incompatible, with that of emptiness? Can a soul find liberation from its limitations and suffering, or is it necessarily stuck in eternal bondage to birth and death, deluded by endless grasping and clinging to things of naught? Is liberation only possible by giving up our belief in the soul? If the answer to these questions is in accord with Buddhism, the five skandhas doctrine would seem to be useful; but if a soul can (through whatever heroic efforts of spiritual

practice) extricate itself from the phenomenal and reach the noumenal, then that doctrine would seem to be, at best, redundant, if not ridiculous.

Consider, first, a temporary soul (whether its existence is limited to one lifetime or it spans several lifetimes, either in a body or disembodied). Such a soul, necessarily, like all other impermanent existents that have a beginning and an end, has come from emptiness and will return to emptiness; it is created and conditioned, by the uncreated and unconditioned One. Moreover, a temporary soul might even be regarded as eternal in the sense that it has a share in eternity, not only when it temporarily exists manifestly as a distinct entity, but even before its creation and after its apparent destruction, when it is still or again an undifferentiated part of the original ground. So, no problem there, other than finding out precisely how to indeed liberate it (no mean feat, of course).

A problem might rather be found with regard to an eternal soul, and this is no doubt what caused Buddhists to be leery of the very idea of self (which they regarded as necessarily eternal, remember). The problem is: if the individual soul (or anything else, for that matter) stands side by side with the ultimate reality throughout eternity, then how can it ever merge with it? No way to liberation would seem conceivable for a soul by definition eternally separate from emptiness. But even here, we could argue that the separation of the distinct soul from the universal unitary matrix is only illusory; i.e. that all through eternity this indestructible soul is in fact a constant emanation from the abyss and really always imbedded in it. What makes an illusion (e.g. a mirage or a reflection) illusory is not how long it lasts (a split second or a billion years), but its relativity (a mirage is due to refraction of light from an oasis, a mirror image of the moon is due to reflection of light from the moon).

So, in truth, even an eternal soul can conceivably be reconciled with emptiness. I am not affirming the soul is necessarily eternal in that sense, but only pointing out that it conceivably could be so.

In conclusion, the skandhas idea serves no purpose with regard to the requirement of emptiness. Indeed, it is highly misleading, since it is based on false assumptions concerning other doctrinal possibilities. Buddhists cling to this idea for dear life, but without true justification. Clearly, the position taken here by me is that logically we can well claim that people have a soul, and reject the orthodox Buddhist belief that what we call our self is nothing but a cluster of passing impersonal events, without giving up on the more metaphysical doctrine that at the root of spiritual (i.e. every soul's) existence there is 'emptiness' as here understood.

Just as we can say that apparently substantial material, or concrete mental, phenomena are ultimately empty, so we can say that the soul each of us consists of is 'substantial' in its own rarified, spiritual way and at the same time ultimately empty, i.e. at root just part of the universal and unitary ground of all being. In other words, contrary to what Buddhist philosophers imagined, it is not necessary to deny the existence of the soul in order to affirm its 'emptiness', any more than it is necessary to deny the existence of the body or mind in order to affirm their 'emptiness'. That is to say, there is no logical necessity to adopt the five skandhas idea, if the purpose of such position is simply to affirm 'emptiness'.

### 3. In conclusion

The fact of the matter is that the no-soul thesis is riddled with contradictions. We are told by Buddhists that we can find liberation, but at the same time that we don't

even *exist*. We are told to be conscious, but at the same time we are denied the power of cognition – i.e. that the soul is the *subject* of cognitive events. We are told to make the effort to find liberation, but at the same time we are denied possession of volition – i.e. that the soul is the *free agent* of acts of will. We are told to make the wise choices in life, but at the same time we are denied the privilege of value-judgment – i.e. that the soul is capable of *independent and objective valuation*.

The no-soul thesis is upheld in spite of these paradoxes, which were well-known to Buddhist philosophers from the start. What is the meaning of spirituality without a spirit (soul, self)? Who can be liberated if there is no one to liberate? Why and how engage in spiritual practice if we not only do not exist, but also have no power of consciousness, volition or valuation? Why bother to find release from suffering if we do not really suffer? Who is writing all this and who is reading it? The no-soul thesis simply cannot be upheld. The soul can well be claimed to be ultimately ‘empty’ in the aforesaid sense, but the thesis of five skandhas instead of a soul is logically untenable.

We have seen that the five skandhas doctrine cannot be regarded as an accurate description of the human psyche in its entirety. It is not a thorough phenomenological account, since it ignores mankind’s major higher faculties – intelligence, rationality and freewill. It focuses exclusively on some petty aspects of human psychology, the five skandhas, without openly acknowledging the more noble side of humanity, which makes liberation from such pettiness possible. It has metaphysical pretensions, with ontological and epistemological implications – notably, the idea that we are empty of soul, devoid of personality – but it turns out that this idea does not stand up to logical scrutiny,

being based on circular arguments and foregone conclusions.

Thus, whereas the five skandhas thesis may have at first seemed like an important observation and idea, which applied and buttressed the more general Buddhist thesis of emptiness, and at the same time provided a spiritually useful description of human psychology, it turns out to be a rather limited and not very well thought-out creed. This does not mean that it has no worth at all, but it does mean that it is far less important than it is made out to be.

This being said, I hasten to add that the present criticism of this one doctrine within Buddhist psychology and philosophy is not intended as a blanket belittling or rejection of Buddhist psychology and philosophy. Certainly, Buddhist psychology and philosophy have a great deal more to offer the seeker after wisdom than this one doctrine. It is rich in profound insights into the human psyche and condition, which every human being can benefit from. This is evident already in the opening salvo of Buddhist thought, the Four Noble Truths, which acknowledge the human condition of suffering and identify the psychological source of such suffering in clinging to all sorts of vain things, and which declare the possibility of relief from suffering through a set program of spiritual practices.

In the Buddhist conception of human life, our minds are poisoned by numerous cognitive and volitional and emotional problems. At the root of human suffering lies a mass of ignorance and delusion about oneself and the world one suddenly and inexplicably finds oneself in. These give rise to all sorts of unwise desires, including greed (for food, for material possessions) and lust (for sexual gratification, for power), and aversions (fears, hatreds). The latter impel people to act with selfishness (in the more pathological sense of the term), and in some

cases with dishonesty or even violence (coldness and cruelty), and generally with stupidity. But Buddhism proposes ways to cure these diseases, so its outlook is essentially positive.

Clearly, Buddhism has a particularly ‘psychological’ approach to life. It is also distinguished by its businesslike, ‘no blame’ approach to spirituality, which is no doubt why many people in the West nowadays are attracted to it. Unlike most of the other major religions, notably Judaism and its Christian and Islamic offshoots, it does not try to make people feel guilty for their sins, but rather encourages them to deal with their problems out of rational self-interest. It is thus less emotional and more rational in many ways.

Judaism too, for instance, includes psychological teachings, although perhaps to a lesser extent. One of the main features of Judaic psychology is the idea that humans have two innate tendencies – a good inclination (*yetzer tov*) and a bad inclination (*yetzer ra*)<sup>180</sup>. These

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<sup>180</sup> This two-inclinations psychological thesis of course stands in contrast to three other theses: that humans have only a good inclination (optimism), or only a bad inclination (pessimism), or no natural inclination at all (neutrality). This is an interesting issue that deserves a longer discussion. The difference between these four theses is moot, if we consider that all this is about *influences* on the soul, and not about determinism or fatalism; the soul remains free to choose whether influenced one way or the other to greater or lesser degree. I think the point of the Jewish doctrine is simply this: to make the individual aware that he is constantly under pressure from influences of various sorts, some good and some bad, and that he is wise to at all times *identify with* the positive ones and *avoid identifying with* the negative ones; i.e. to regard the true ultimate desire of his soul as the good and to regard the bad as delusive nonsense.

two inclinations *influence* a person for good or for bad in the course of life (physical life and spiritual life), but they never *control* one, for human beings are graced with freewill. This means that come what may, a man or woman is always (at least, once adult) responsible for his or her choices. This ethical belief in freedom of choice and personal responsibility is present in Judaism since its inception, as the following Biblical verse makes clear: “*Sin coucheth at the door; and unto thee is its desire, but thou mayest rule over it*” (Gen. 4:7)<sup>181</sup>. Knowing this, that one indeed has freedom of will, one can overcome all bad influences and forge ahead towards the eternal life.

In Buddhism, we may discern a similar possibility of taking full responsibility for one’s life in the very first chapter of the *Dhammapada* (1:1-2). “*If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows... If a man acts with a pure mind, joy follows.*” Although the five skandhas doctrine gives people the impression (as shown above) that they are not responsible for their deeds, we see here that this is not really the message of Buddhism, which generally enjoins strong spiritual effort in the direction of self-liberation and thence of liberation for all sentient beings.

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<sup>181</sup> The idea of ‘inclination to evil’ may also be traced to the Bible, namely to Gen. 8:21, which quotes God as stating that “the inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” (That is said after the Deluge; earlier, in Gen. 6:5, it is said more pessimistically that “every inclination of the thoughts of his [man’s] heart is only evil all through the day.” Commentators explain the difference by suggesting that the Deluge made man wiser. Maybe the difference between the terms “the inclination of man’s heart” and the “inclination of the thoughts of man’s heart” has some significance.)

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**Works by Avi Sion**

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